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"DEATHLOOP"





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"THE TIME
ASSASSINS!"

The Coming Storm



ANDREW REINER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S are still selling out as soon as they're available. The demand greatly outweighs the supply, and it doesn't look like that scenario is going to change any time soon. The pandemic took its toll on manufacturing and shipping, and also drove up interest in all systems, including the Switch (which is also hard to find).

If you haven't been able to get your hands on the new consoles yet, you're not missing out on much when it comes to new releases. Most games from the early part of the year straddle generations, and few are designed to truly take advantage of the new hardware. Don't worry, you'll soon have many options, especially if you own a PlayStation 5.

Three notable console exclusives are being released on Sony's platform this summer. The fun begins with *Returnal* from Housemarque on April 30, which is quickly followed up by *Deathloop* from Arkane Studios on May 21, and *Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart* on June 11. This month, we take a deep look at *Deathloop*'s unique time manipulation and "death puzzle" concepts, on page 66 we have a big preview of *Returnal*, and we'll have more on *Ratchet & Clank* in the months ahead.

On top of these Sony exclusives, the next few months look as busy as the holiday season for both Xbox and PlayStation with the releases of *Resident Evil Village*, *Back 4 Blood* (a spiritual successor to *Left 4 Dead*), *Biomutant*, *Mass Effect Legendary Edition*, *Outriders*, and *MLB The Show 21*. The latter game is no longer a PlayStation exclusive and is coming to Xbox systems – and yes, it is still published by Sony!

And that's just the start of summer. More games are expected to join this excellent slate as we inch closer to its release timeframe. The issue you hold in your hands provides insight into some of these titles and also plenty of others that are on the way, including *Overwatch 2* and *Axiom Verge 2*.

Clear out that back catalog of games, because we're about to have plenty of new releases to play.

Be safe. Be happy. And game on!

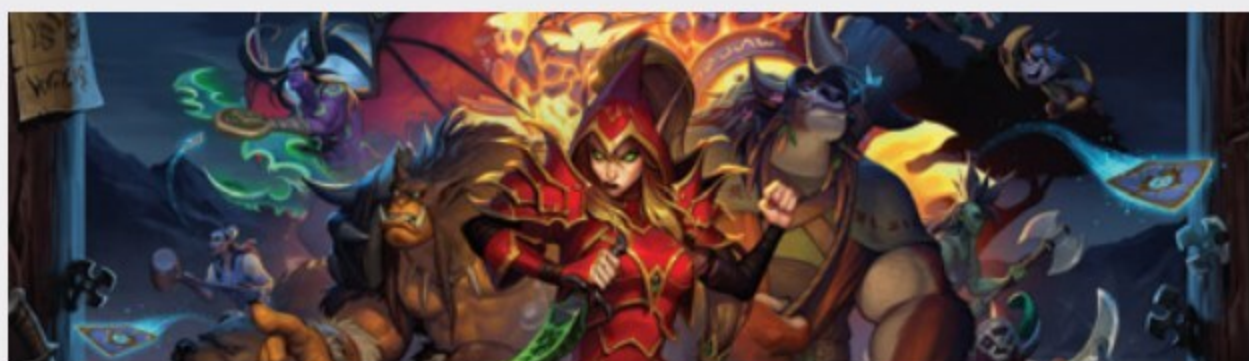
Reiner



42 Deathloop

Dishonored developer Arkane is back with its next venture, *Deathloop*, all about assassins caught in a time loop. We spent extended time checking out the game and talking to the team behind this inventive first-person shooter, figuring out how its complicated world operates.

by Ben Reeves



12 Bringing The Storm With BlizzCon

Even though it was remote this year, we attended the 2021 BlizzCon event and got the lowdown on what to expect from Overwatch 2, Diablo II: Resurrected, Diablo IV, and Hearthstone.



26 Keeping The Arcade Fire Alive

Publisher Team17 has set up a fund to help aid in preserving arcade history in the troubled times of COVID-19. We talked to Team17 and the various organizations it is supporting.



18 More Than Just Dots On A Map

We talked to developers at Insomniac, Sucker Punch, Ubisoft, and more, about their philosophies when designing open worlds, keeping players engaged, and the work involved in creating these video game locations.



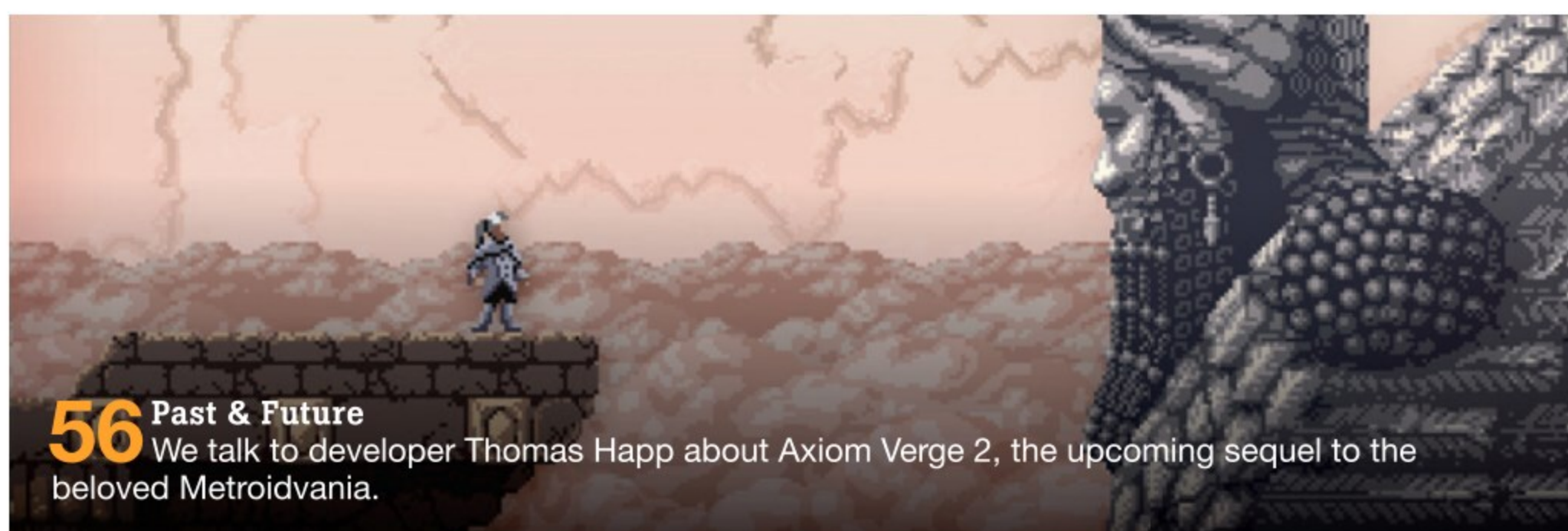
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Last year, Blaseball, a unique take on America's pastime, took the internet by storm. We talked to developer The Game Band to learn about the history of the game, how it was born from tragedy, and what fans can look forward to next.



36 Spring Buying Guide

Whether its apparel, board games, books, or at-home virtual reality set-ups, we've compiled the definitive list of gear you should keep your eyes and wallets tuned to this spring.



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We talk to developer Thomas Happ about Axiom Verge 2, the upcoming sequel to the beloved Metroidvania.

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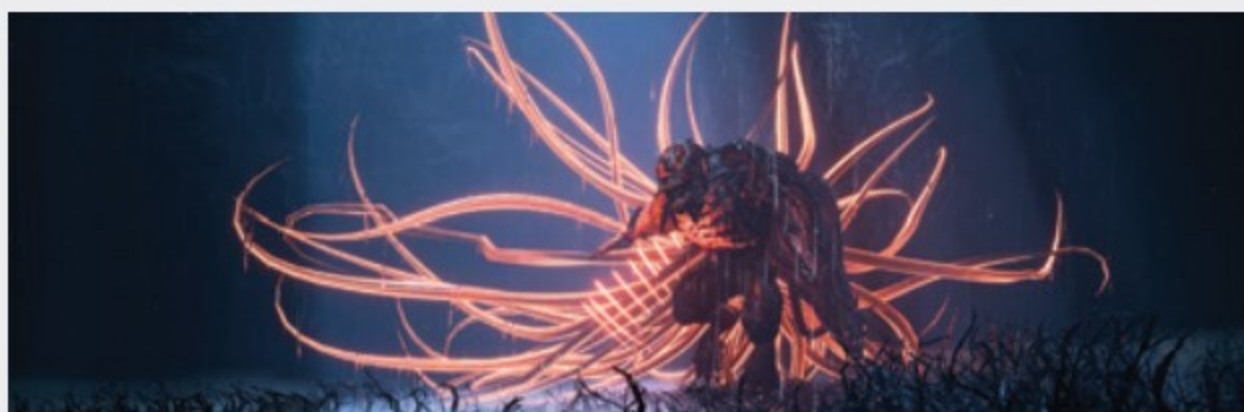
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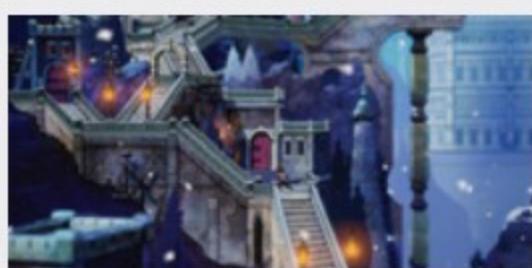
62 Resident Evil Village
Capcom recently gave us a big, extended look at the upcoming survival-horror game. Read all about the new entry's story, combat, and very tall vampires in our two-page preview.



66 Returnal
We recently looked at Housemarque's upcoming rogue-like action game, and we were impressed with what we saw.



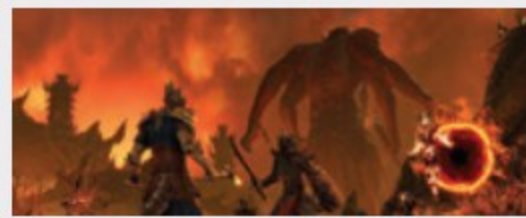
75 Little Nightmares II
Tarsier Studios is back with its newest nightmare-inducing puzzle platformer. Looking like a Roald Dahl book from Hell, find out why we loved our time with this terrifying sequel.



76 Bravely Default II
Grindy, nostalgic, and satisfying to explore, we offer our thoughts on this throwback to the classic era of RPGs.



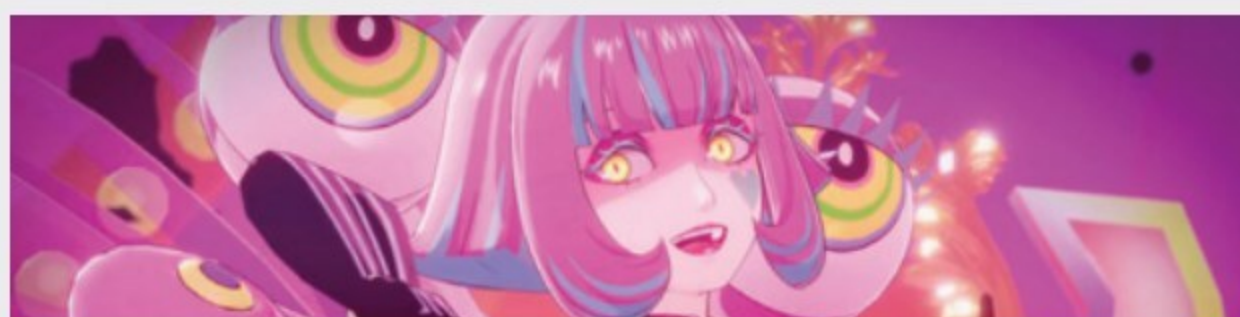
78 Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury
What's old is new again. Find out why Super Mario 3D World remains one of the best Mario games of all time, and why Bowser's Fury is as good a pack-in title as any.



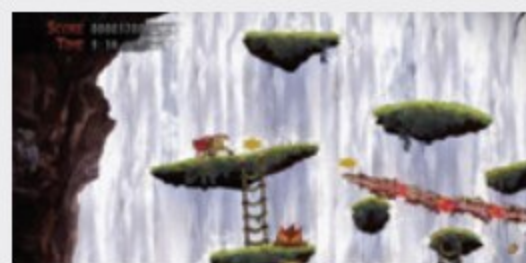
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Bethesda Softworks has been hard at work updating and expanding ESO, and hopefully adding some romance options soon.



68 Biomutant
It's been a couple years since we last saw this open-world adventure game, so we caught up with the development team to find out what's new and what's changing before the game's May 25 release.



77 Persona 5 Strikers
Four years after their first adventure in Tokyo, the Phantom Thieves are once again changing the hearts of the wicked. Does this new hack-and-slash adventure live up to the lofty expectations of Persona 5?



79 Ghosts 'N Goblins: Resurrection
The classic series returns, with a nostalgic throwback that is as beautiful as it is ghoulishly challenging.

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**LA-A-A-GGI-ING
THRO-O-OWING-G YOU
OFF-FF YOUR GA-AME?**



MAYBE YOU JUST NEED A





This month our readers once again weigh in on Cyberpunk 2077, have fond memories of Blitzball, and are wondering if we're moving to a future of forever games...

Mass Effect Legendary Edition

Commander Shepard is back! Not in the way I want, but I will gladly replay these games again as we wait for BioWare to create the next epic trilogy. It will be a trilogy, right? Andromeda didn't cut it as a solo game, and I think, like the first game, it could have been regarded in higher light if it had sequels that built upon it. That happened to the first Mass Effect. It wasn't the true vision of the series when it launched, but is now held in high regard for the foundation it built. Mass Effect isn't a game. It's a trilogy of games. What say you, *GI*?

Al Ottley
via email

The approach developers take to remastering games has been fascinating to see. I'm glad we are seeing more of them bring back classics, not just for new generations to play, but to better preserve them. Far too many games disappear and can never be played again. Having Mass Effect back is a great thing, and I hope its release leads to the series never disappearing again. It needs to be a mainstay.

Samantha Vickers
Ocean City, MD

I love the Mass Effect cover and many other covers. I have a poster from the Mass Effect 3 cover and was wondering if *GI* would sell more posters of the

covers. I have seen them on the Extra Life auctions and would be interested in buying some.

Taylor
Cleveland, OH

I never thought I would play the Mass Effect trilogy again, but the story you wrote made it sound awesome, and with so few games releasing during the pandemic, I think it may be my game of the summer. I lost three of my party in my first and only playthrough, and I'm now determined to keep all of them alive in this next one!

Michael
Boothbay, ME

Fans have been clamoring for a Mass Effect remaster or remake for years. While the latter is something we would have loved to see – especially to unify the gameplay between all three chapters – it would have taken too long to create. The remaster was the right approach, which allows BioWare to instead focus its efforts on creating new Mass Effect experiences. We hope we see another trilogy that picks up right where Mass Effect 3 left off. We don't know if that's the direction BioWare will go in, but we can't wait to find out. Regarding selling *Game Informer* posters, that is something we are considering. We'll hopefully have more on that soon!

To Cyberpunk Or Not

I'm a big CD Projekt Red fan and a lucky owner of a PS5. Like many, I was really looking forward to Cyberpunk 2077. Here's my question: Should I wait for a bespoke "next-gen" version of the game before playing it on PS5? Or should I just dig into the PS4 version now (on my PS5) and hope the improved performance is enough to overcome the barriers to enjoyability so many players have experienced?

Howlingfantod
Milwaukee, WI

We still don't have a firm release date for the enhanced PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S patches, but the base game does continue to improve with each new update CD Projekt Red releases. Our recommendation would be to at least wait for guidance on timing from CD Projekt Red for those enhanced versions. There's a chance you could jump in now, only to have the better version be announced just days after that.



Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Console Colors

Why do consoles always launch with just one or two colors? They should go the route of most car companies and give you a wider choice to better fit your lifestyle and room. It takes years before we get cool alternate versions. So frustrating.

Emilia Martin
Texarkana, AR

The solo color we usually see at launch is to establish an identity that is immediately recognizable. PlayStation 5 is white. Xbox Series X is black. We don't disagree with you, however. Some of the coolest console designs are the ones that take chances with the colors. The red Spider-Man PlayStation 4 is amazing, and it would be equally as striking even without the Spider-Man logo on it.



Final Fantasy X: Blitzball

Do you think Final Fantasy X should make a separate game just for Blitzball? Or my second idea, do you think Blitzball could be a virtual-reality game? I don't know about other Final Fantasy fans, but I don't know why Final Fantasy VII is so popular. I replayed Final Fantasy X a lot just for Blitzball.

Your Fan, TK as "The Kid"
Alabama

All of the Final Fantasy games have room for growth into different genres or to expand upon the stories of individual characters. The underwater Blitzball competitions in Final Fantasy X were polarizing in execution as a minigame, but I think we can all agree it's a cool idea for a sport and could have potential to be a standalone game. But is this how you would like Final Fantasy X to come back? We'd much rather see new stories about that world, perhaps in a different era. Blitzball could be a part of that.

More Star Wars

I am so happy Electronic Arts no longer has a stranglehold on Star Wars. I still want EA to make great Star Wars games, but also want to see what other studios can do with it. Ubisoft entering the conversation is super interesting. Are we basically getting Star Wars Assassin's Creed? That's what I got from the "open world" description. Here's hoping! A Jedi running up walls just like an assassin sounds perfect! When do you think we'll get it?

"Stormrage"
via email

We can't wait to see what Ubisoft is cooking up, but we have no idea what direction developer Massive Entertainment is taking with the project or when it will arrive. We just know it's early in development. No matter what they do, we hope a developer is working on something with The Mandalorian. That sliver of Star Wars is primed for a game.



Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Would you romance a Krogan in a future Mass Effect? (Mainly for Kimberley and Liana, but all GI writers please answer)"

Kim: Only if they are as cool as Wrex.

Liana: YES! Four quads!

Reiner: I hope I get to play as a Krogan in the next game and get to romance everyone!

"Hey can you do a shout out on an app game?"

We assume this is about games to play on your phone. We still have a deep love affair with Clash Royale and Pokémon Go, but also spend lots of time with Among Us, Alto's Odyssey, Legends of Runeterra, RollerCoaster Tycoon Classic, Bonza, and Marvel Strike Force.

"I play a couple of different farming games each year. Is it one of the most successful genres no one ever talks about?"

That's a great way to put it. Farming Simulator is an annual juggernaut that even has a successful esports Farming Simulator League.

Best Comment:

"I've eaten McDonald's burgers for the last five days trying to get packs of Pokémon cards. For the sake of my health, I think I have to throw in the towel."

Question Of The Month:

What's your current take on microtransactions?



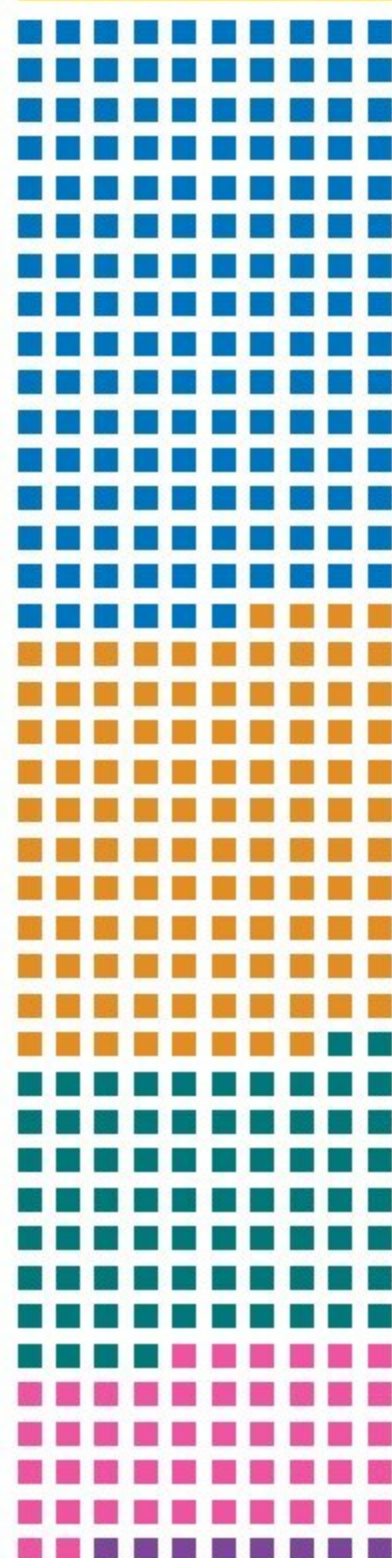
Forever Games

The Simpsons is still on the air and I don't know who is watching it. I feel like all of my friends had a stint with it – whether it was for a few years or a decade – and then moved away from it for good. Are we starting to see Simpsons-like games? World of Warcraft seems to be one that will go on forever. I played it for four years when it launched and haven't gone back. Some of my friends returned to it for an expansion. No matter how long we play, will it ever be possible to see it through to the end, or will it never end?

Auston McDavid
Toronto, Canada

This is an interesting observation, Auston. World of Warcraft has maintained a devoted following since it was launched in 2004. Is it the same player base that keeps it alive? No. Some people may have stuck with it through the years, but new people are jumping in all of the time. Will there ever be a true ending to it? A final mission people need to go on? We doubt it. To your point of it being a second life, as long as people keep coming back to it, Blizzard will continue making new stories and experiences. The better way to look at it for closure is seeing specific stories and questlines through to the end.

On Your Mind



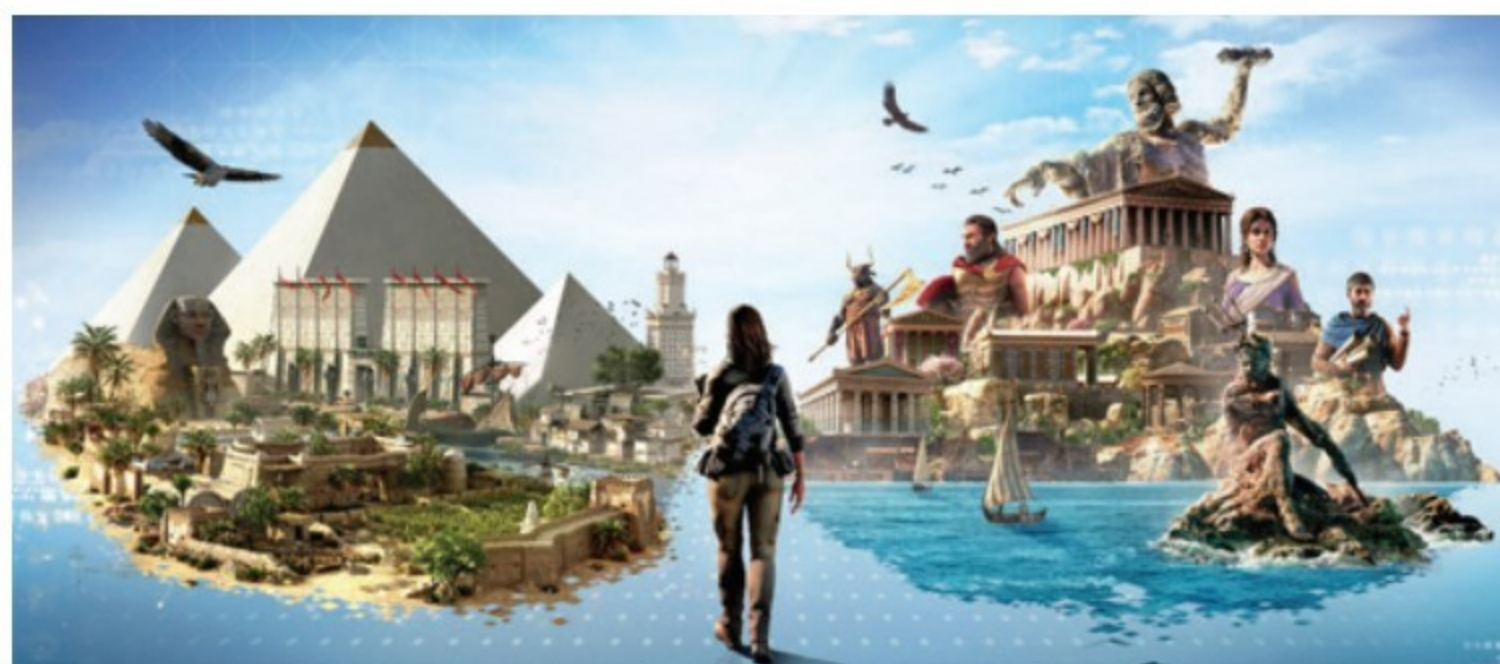
- Are heavily invested in living games
- Say they play Call of Duty: Warzone
- Sounded the alarms when Microsoft considered raising the price of Xbox Live Gold
- Say they play Fortnite
- Hate living games

Toning Down For Teens

I think that the latest two Assassin's Creed games have looked really amazing to a history buff like me. However, I'm only 14, so "M" rated games are out of the question. I was wondering if it would be worthwhile for game studios to make a slightly toned-down version of their games to appeal to a wider audience. Like a "T" rated and "M" rated version. This might take a bit more time, but would the extra copies sold make it worth their while?

Bombad Blasters Bro
via email

It's a tall request for Assassin's Creed, when the game in question is about the bloody assassination of historical figures. While recent entries in that series offer an option to turn off blood effects, the content is still quite violent. Thankfully,



Origins and Odyssey both offer a wonderful Discovery Tour mode for historians like yourself, and it's coming soon to Valhalla as well. The experience uses the crafted game world as a backdrop to a fully educational experience about the cultures and people of the era, and these tours can be purchased as stand-alone experiences that are rated "T."

As for your broader question, it would be prohibitively expensive for publishers and developers to craft separate versions of their games. However, those same creators often think very carefully about escalating into M-rated territory with their projects, and it's exactly because they might lose out on sales to gamers like you.

Reader Responses

Last month we asked our readers if they were happy with their next-generation console purchases. Here is their early take on the future of games...

I'm loving both PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X, and I have to say Sony and Microsoft deserve way more praise for just how stable these devices are. The same goes for PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. Those machines were awesome and reliable. The days of machines "red ringing" are well behind us. The new units are fast and powerful and awesome. I am so happy I got both of them. I just wish games that had to connect to servers would be faster, but I guess that's a problem with our Internet infrastructure, not the consoles.

Eden Ancelotti
Lubbock, TX

I didn't think the speed boost would matter that much, but holy cow it's a game changer. I'm loving my Xbox Series X and how quickly I can switch between playing Overcooked with my kids and Assassin's Creed Valhalla on my own. Speed is a vanity thing, in my opinion, and isn't what I hope next gen will only be about, but it is a nice way to kick off something new.

Sledge O'Lear
via email

I struck out on getting a PlayStation 5 until January, but finally got lucky enough to get one in my cart. I played through Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales (which is gorgeous and great), and also really enjoyed Astro's Playroom (the best game for the controller), but... Now what? Seriously? Where are the games?! What a disappointing launch in terms of software.

Joan Cruyff
Manhattan, NY



1



gallery

WINNER

1 Nicole Delos Reyes

If you square off against this princess, you're the one who is going to need saving.

2 Katelynn Jacob

He may look great, but Arthur is breaking almost every gun-safety rule here.

3 Melina Walter

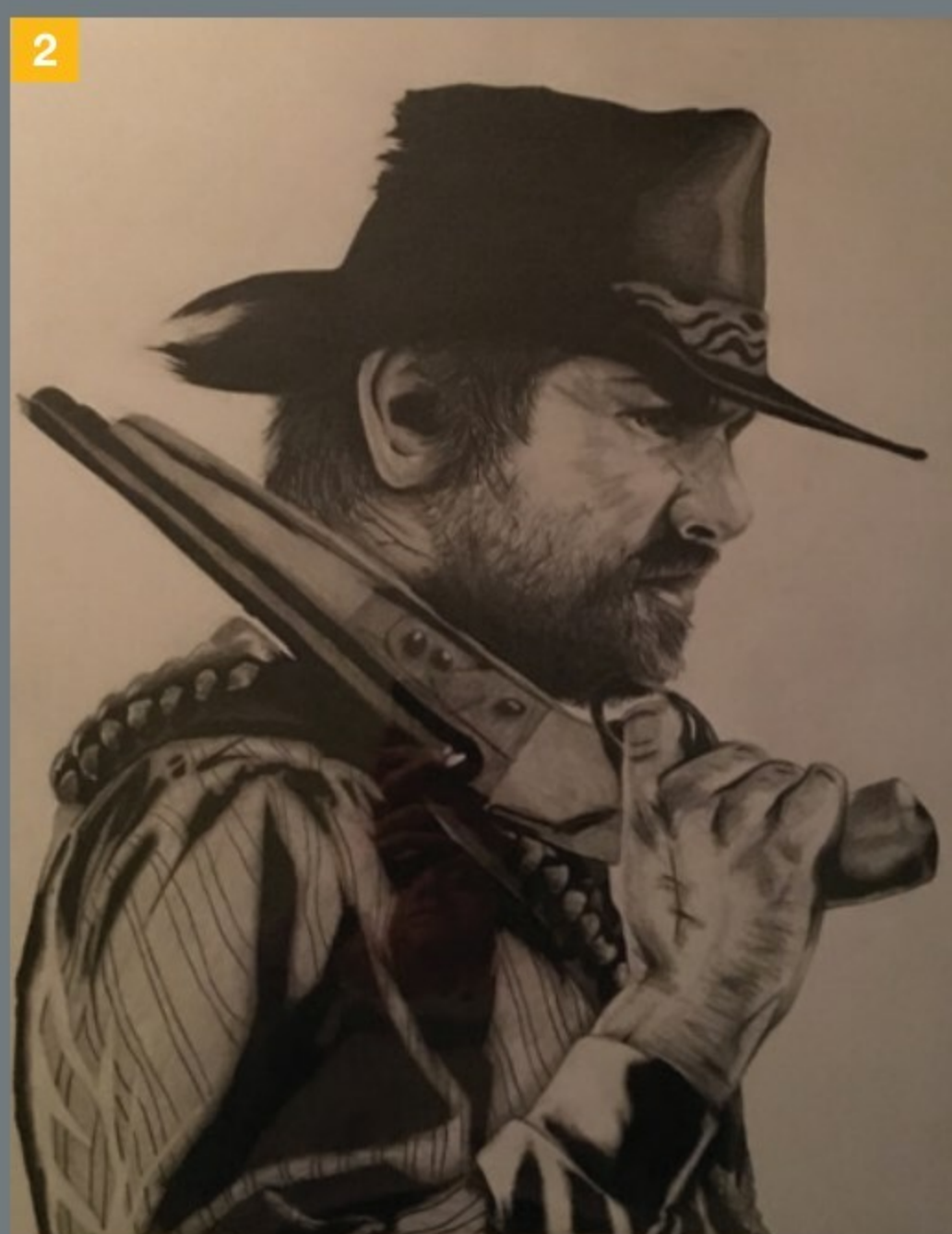
It looks like Midna might be trying to hide behind this tree. Unfortunately, that huge helmet is tough to conceal.

4 Amber Butler

Since Slytherin is the "evil" Hogwarts house, shouldn't its representative be the predatory loan shark Tom Nook?

5 Caedmon Anderson

The residents of the Mushroom Kingdom politely dance to Mario's endless remixes of himself saying "Wahoo" and "It's-a me!"



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BRINGING



THE STORM WITH BLIZZCON

by Daniel Tack



Blizzard celebrates its 30th anniversary this year with BlizzCon, held digitally due to COVID-19. As the pandemic started to ravage the world at large, game-development studios faced numerous challenges as they attempted to finish projects and get new ones rolling. This year, Blizzard taps into games old and new as it channels a slate of announcements that highlight the company's past, present, and future.

"If you look at our foundational values at Blizzard, they still apply," says Blizzard co-founder Allen Adham. "For me, the most important one of those values is 'gameplay first.' And what that derives from is those old days playing text-based Infocom adventure games, or low-resolution, with very few color games, and recognizing how fun those games were. Growing up and watching the industry, watching the resolution, technology, and audio fidelity advance, if you remember those old days, it kind of reminds you that nothing trumps great gameplay, and everything else is icing on top of the cake."

CHANGING THE GAME WITH OVERWATCH 2

Since BlizzCon attendees had a chance to go hands-on with Overwatch 2 at BlizzCon back in 2019, players are puzzled by the delay out of 2021. Some of that is probably COVID-related development woes, but there are other significant factors, like a massive shift in some of the design concepts and philosophies behind Overwatch's archetype systems. Speaking with vice president of Blizzard and Overwatch lead designer Jeff Kaplan, I asked what makes Overwatch 2 a sequel and not just a big patch.

"I think how you approach a sequel is very different from how you approach just updating a live service," Kaplan says.

"This sequel gives you the opportunity to question every decision you made before in a way that you can't necessarily do with the live game. But for a sequel, players are much more understanding, especially when you're introducing new game modes, you're introducing new content, you're introducing new maps – everybody kind of gets, 'It's supposed to be different now.'"

The big difference? Change. You can change things in significant ways with a sequel that you simply can't alter with a living game. Obviously, there are some technological enhancements that go along with the sequel as well, but the major component is being able to massively manipulate the core.

"Something I've learned in all my years of working on online games: It doesn't matter what the change is, players have a very tough time coping with it," Kaplan says. "I used to use World of Warcraft as an example. When I was working on WoW, I used to say we could mail every single player in World of Warcraft 100 gold that just shows up in their mailbox. And players would be very upset with us for some reason, I don't know why, but I guarantee they'll be upset about it."

If you're familiar with Overwatch now, you're well aware that one of the worst things you can do for your team is charge at the other team with your tank and start swinging. Instead, you're encouraged to play defensively. New passive enhancements to each class archetype allow players to engage with their class fantasies instead of pushing them to play against their instincts. The biggest example of this is the tank class moving toward a brawler playstyle, one that's rewarded for crashing and bashing into enemy lines instead of being relegated to a team shield.

"Overwatch players will tell you, 'Well, what's the right time for Reinhardt to use charge?' And the answer is ... 'Don't,'" Kaplan says. "And we've all had that feeling when we're playing Overwatch and we watch our Reinhardt charging and we're like, 'No, don't do that.' A lot of what's going on with the sort of changes, you know, trying more of this brawler role is, 'What is this fantasy that players have? How do you make it right for players to swing the hammer instead of just hold the shield up? How can we create space for that to be the fun thing to do?'"



With big moves like class changes alongside new maps, modes, and other fare, Overwatch 2 is also bringing co-op to the game in a huge way, with progression systems and ways to enjoy taking on A.I. enemies with your friends. Teamwork is key as you experiment with different ability and skill compositions that wouldn't ever be allowed in player vs. player – or would they? Kaplan states that although the wild options, like a 10-second stun or a sniper-spec Reaper, break the standard PvP format heavily, there will probably be a custom or arcade game mode to take those game-breaking moves out for a spin. For the co-op, players can enjoy digging deep into talent trees and creating custom builds for their favorite

heroes. You can make a Junkrat dual-wield grenade launchers, which is pretty cool. I asked Kaplan how replayability factored into the new PvE experience, because we've all crushed a campaign, enjoyed it, and then never looked back.

Many factors are designed to carry the replay factor for PvE, such as varied maps (all maps from Overwatch and the new ones coming in Overwatch 2 are going to be utilized), varied characters and their associated talent trees and skills, and varied enemy encounters. Nothing is as boring as memorizing a map and going through the motions, right? Enemy encounters will have different factions that they can draw from, as well as many different unit types to make up those battles, so you can have

a different crawl through a level each time. Not only will the enemies have a combination of skills that keep you on your toes, but the objectives can shift from mission to mission as well with a good range of activities to explore.

"One of our favorite mission types is, internally, we just call it 'wall of death.' You're basically running from this huge poison wall that's moving through the level," Kaplan says. "And you can imagine the difference between mobility heroes and non-mobility heroes, and how that starts to feel."

While Overwatch 2 probably isn't landing this year, the new additions and alterations are sure to have players discussing how to build out their heroes all through 2021.

THE DEVIL IN THE DETAILS OF DIABLO

The Diablo franchise is poised for a powerful year, despite the unsurprising news that Diablo IV won't be ready for a launch in 2021. What is ready for this year? Diablo II: Resurrected, a remaster of the Diablo that changed the gaming world forever when it launched 20 years ago. While the first Diablo is an interesting playthrough even today, concepts in Diablo II resonate throughout the entirety of modern gaming. Diablo II: Resurrected features remade cinematics, 4K resolution, and massively upgraded visuals. Of course, Diablo II: Resurrected includes the original game and the Diablo II: Lord of Destruction expansion. Yes, we're all going to be doing a lot of Baal runs.

Perhaps even more exciting, the remaster is headed to virtually every platform, including PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC. Diablo II: Resurrected features cross-platform progression with participating platforms as well, which should facilitate your journeys through jungle, desert, and beyond.

While the remaster looks stunning in its BlizzCon presentation (I'm not worried about a Warcraft III: Reforged visual dissonance happening here), there will also be a few quality-of-life tweaks. Now, the Diablo II community would likely balk if anything too radical happened, so the discussed changes are quite minor. For instance, players can opt in to pick up gold while walking on it/near it, instead of having to manually click on it. Players can also access a shared stash space instead of having to use "mules" like in the original game (these were essentially just low-level, non-played characters who would hold valuables for your main characters). As the game is coming to console, controller support is in play on those platforms and on PC. Other small adjustments make it easier to join friends playing through modern-day Battle.net.

Outside of these few minor changes, Diablo II retains its roots – ear-collecting, unbalanced PvP, and all. With the vast graphical improvements, Diablo II should whet the appetite of those starving for Diablo IV.

And speaking of Diablo IV, Blizzard unveiled a major class coming to the game. The Rogue encompasses that sort of raw, brutal highwayman style that has abilities that align with other Diablo roguish types like the Assassin from Diablo II or the Demon Hunter from Diablo III. While the old-school dexterity Rogue was initially found in the first Diablo title, the modern-day version has a lot more breadth and depth. If you want to use daggers imbued with poison, cold, or other elements, you can. You can also pick up a bow to rain down a hail of arrows. Your Rogue can go in several interesting directions depending on your build



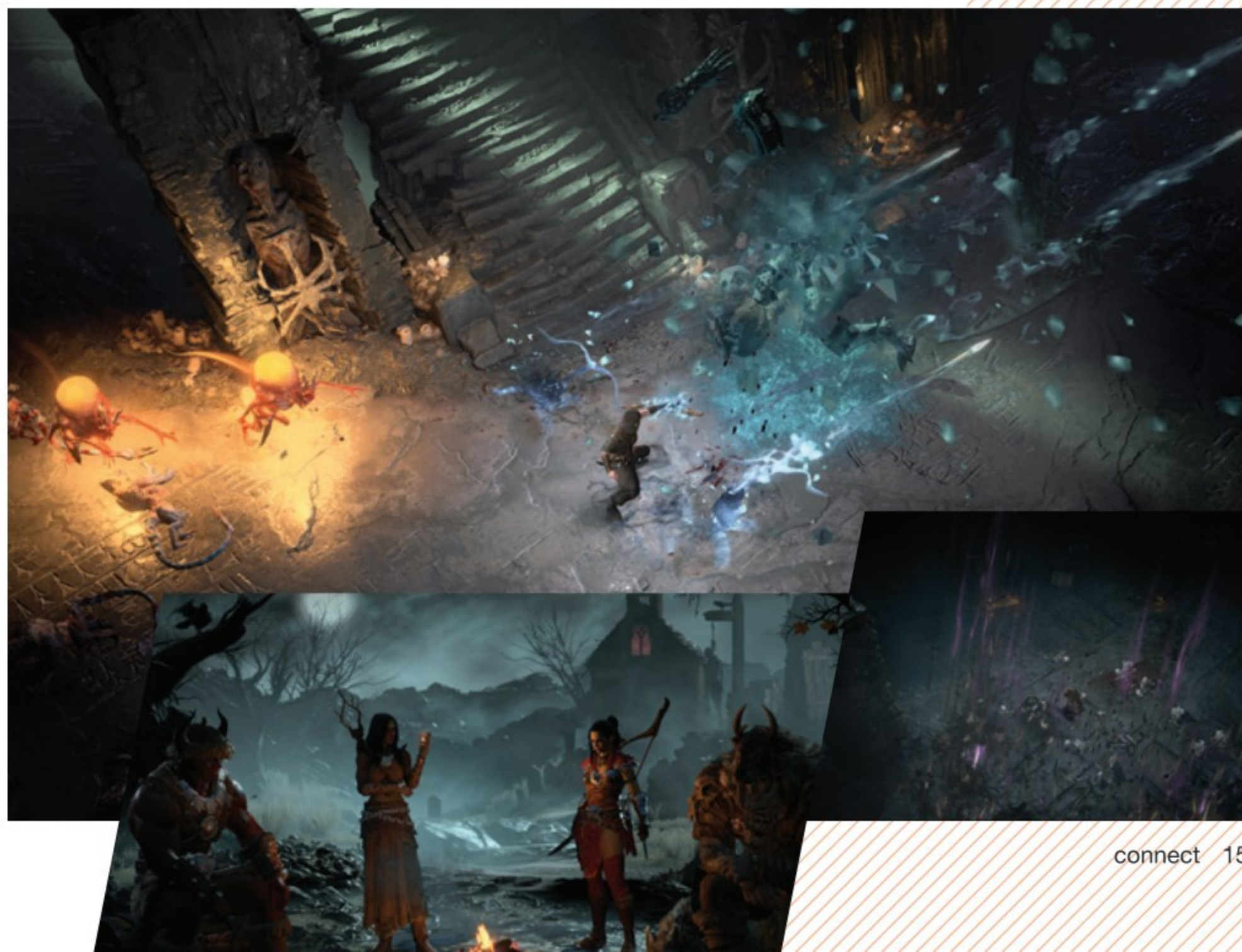
and personality. Yes, you can also make a trap build sort of in line with the Assassin. Get into a fight where you took on more than you can handle? Suck your opponent into the shadow realm, dividing and conquering your foes as you flit in and out of reality.

While a new class around the campfire is always exciting, some of the other new insights from BlizzCon are equally intriguing. Diablo IV's open-world design has piqued interest since its reveal, and now we know that optional player-vs-player zones are on the menu, featuring special drops and the tantalizing prospects of big risks for big rewards. There are enemies and bosses to take on in the PvP zones, but there's the danger that other players can come along, take you on, and collect the very drops you were after from your corpse.

"We do entice you to the PvP areas, but we don't force you there," says game director Luis Barriga. "There's nothing in the story that will make you go into a PvP area. But we do entice

you with some cool mechanics along the way. So hopefully it strikes a good balance. For players that want it, it's something that's cool. For players that want to avoid it, we give them that opportunity to turn back and go to where they feel more safe. And for players that want to engage in the cat and mouse ... like they don't want to kill anybody, but they're okay exposing themselves to that danger, they can go in and complete their bounty that gives them an extra incentive, and then just get out and be done with it."

PvP has its own special system that transforms players into the Vessel of Hatred as they continue to rack up kills inside the PvP zones, marking them on the minimap, allowing other players to try and avoid them or group up together to take out the executioner. How high are the stakes? You won't lose the gear you have equipped or collected, but the PvP zone features shards that are dropped on death that can be turned in for powerful gear.



HEARTHSTONE AS A PLATFORM

Since Hearthstone emerged on the digital-card-game scene years ago, it's become much more than the standard format along with continual expansion releases that keep the main game rolling. In the traditional game, players will have a sort of progression experience this year as they begin their journey in the Forged in the Barrens expansion. World of Warcraft players will recognize many names and faces here, and the journey through this "low level" area will continue through the year as players embark on something parallel to the leveling adventure through WoW as they explore future expansion content. Forged in the Barrens includes some new mechanics like Frenzy, which triggers when your minions take damage and survive. Since we're in The Barrens, yes, you can actually find Mankrik's wife.

While the expansion is good stuff for standard Hearthstone players and some sweeping core-set revamps will shake up the game completely, what's really exciting about Hearthstone over the past few years and this BlizzCon is that it's become home to more than just the core game. Battlegrounds is the best-in-class auto-chess experience to survive the initial gold rush, and Duels brings a sort of roguelike competitive PvP experience into play where you build a deck along the course of a run.



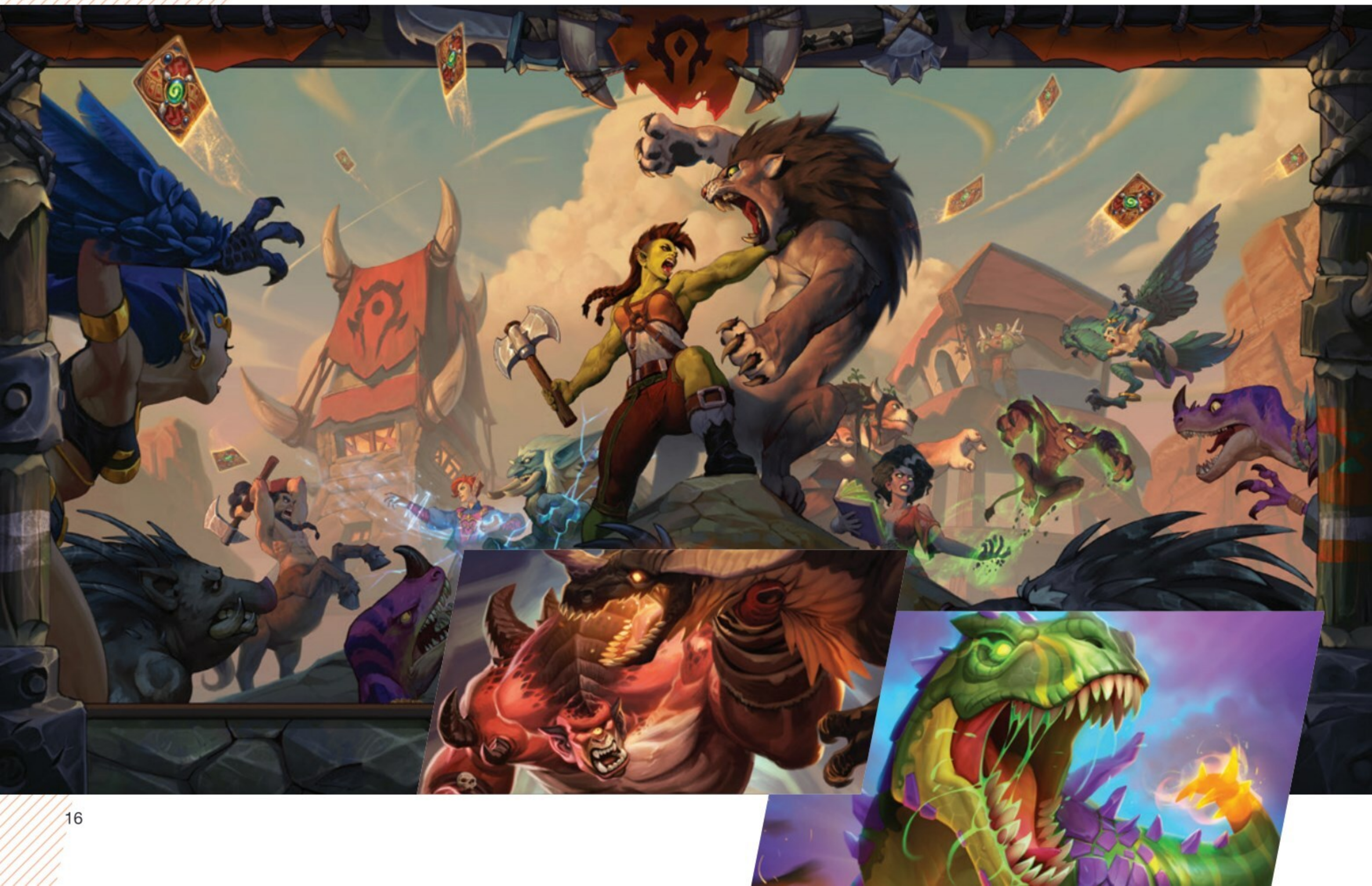
This year, Hearthstone: Mercenaries joins the roster of games you can play in Hearthstone that are not the base game. The new mode allows you to build a team of big-name characters like Sylvanas and Thrall, level them up, equip them with gear, and travel through roguelike maps in a strategy role-playing experience.

While complete details are lacking right now for the new mode, your mercenaries grow and evolve through multiple stages (and artwork) as you take on foes with cooldown-oriented strategies. No mana costs here! In addition to the PvE runs, PvP is also going to be available for Mercenaries.

"So the way it works is that you declare your actions, and then your opponent and you both declare your

actions at the same time," says game director Ben Lee. "In the case of the A.I., they've obviously predetermined them because it's a bit different. You can redo that puzzle-solving element versus the A.I., because you can see what abilities their heroes are doing. In terms of when you're playing, if it's a player, we don't allow that to be the case; you're both declaring at the same time. So there's a lot of mind games, thinking what's my opponent going to do, and you need to master those characters and learn what their abilities are to counter."

Mercenaries, the revamped core set, and Forged in the Barrens are all on deck for 2021. Oh, and if that's not enough card-slinging for you, classic mode is also coming, which allows you to play the game as it was back at launch.





THE PAST AND FUTURE OF WORLD OF WARCRAFT

First, players are going back through the Dark Portal. World of Warcraft Classic is getting the Burning Crusade expansion. How's that going to work, exactly? Players can opt to stay on Classic servers without the "new" content, or move their characters over to participate in one of World of Warcraft's best expansions. The Burning Crusade added flying to the game, a number of memorable raids and bosses, and mysterious zones to explore and quest in. The 2007 content pack arrives this year, and players will be able to create their Blood Elves and/or Draenei before the launch. If you're an old-school WoW player, some of your favorite memories are likely incredible raids like Karazhan, Tempest Keep, and Black Temple.

For modern WoW players, it is time to take on Sylvanas. While I seriously hope that the Banshee Queen does not get the redemption arc here that she is almost certainly going to get, we're going to be moving the battle deep into the Maw, the Shadowlands' take on Hell itself. Inside the Maw, fortifications and footholds are going to be constructed as players can finally mount up and enjoy other amenities that were previously absent from the hostile zone. From there we're headed into a new 10-boss massive raid that ends with, you guessed it, a face-off with the Dark Lady herself. In addition to taking on Sylvanas, the Sanctum of Domination raid features some other high-profile encounters, like an actual battle against the giant Terragruue.



Players can also expect to explore a wacky, wilder dungeon in Tazavesh, The Veiled Market. This is a place where the shady Brokers hang out, messing around with interdimensional travel and portals, selling contraband, and just getting into all kinds of trouble. Expect to see some fun nods and familiar faces from across Azeroth as you work through eight bosses in this Mythic mega-dungeon. Oh, and you'll unlock flying in the Shadowlands, too!

BEYOND BLIZZCON

BlizzCon as a digital event may not have resonated like the lively in-person convention typically does, but Blizzard is looking toward the future for more

announcements and games. "When people look at Blizzard from the outside, sometimes we're so good about keeping kind of quiet, the things we're working on," Adham says. "People are aware of the many things that are already out there, Diablo, Overwatch, Hearthstone, World of Warcraft, etc. When I think about the next 30 years, knowing what's going on behind the scenes ... I'm as excited about the next 30 as I've ever been. Blizzard today is working on more games than we ever have in our history. Development cycles are longer and development teams are bigger. So it takes a little longer to announce the things that we're working on." 🎮

A misty bamboo forest with a person and a horse in the distance. The scene is dimly lit, with soft light filtering through the dense bamboo stalks. In the lower center, a person wearing a traditional hat and a horse are visible, walking through the forest. The overall mood is serene and atmospheric.

**MORE
THAN
JUST DOTS
ON A
MAP**



The enigmatic challenges of crafting compelling open-world landscapes

V

Video games are constantly getting more ambitious, whether it's from advances in technology offering new possibilities or developers building on past innovations. One area that keeps flourishing is open-world design. Players gladly immerse themselves in virtual environments for hours on end, uncovering every possible facet and secret. But keeping players entertained for the long haul isn't as simple as randomly filling the map with various knick-knacks and sidequests. Developers constantly have to find new and interesting ways to keep the journey through these massive landscapes exciting, while also making them feel like living and breathing entities. In these vast locales, myriad activities provide fun diversions, NPCs live out full lives, and intriguing discoveries are around every bend.

Everyone can remember their favorite world to explore, but what goes into building these vistas that slowly sprawl out before you? We were curious about the process behind these fascinating places and the design decisions that bring them to life. To learn more about this intense undertaking, we chatted with several developers from award-winning studios such as Ubisoft Montreal and Quebec, Sucker Punch, Insomniac Games, and CD Projekt Red, to see what goes into these worlds that we voluntarily lose ourselves in.

by Kimberley Wallace

Setting The Stage

Like most endeavors, there isn't a right or wrong approach to building a virtual world, but the setting does influence the structure, activities, and everything else. When working on the Assassin's Creed series, Ubisoft takes into account the historical time period and real-world locations, while CD Projekt Red referenced Mike Pondsmith's pen-and-paper-RPG source material when deciding on locations and districts for Cyberpunk 2077. Other games, like Immortals Fenyx Rising, Ubisoft Quebec's lighthearted take on Greek mythology, embrace the creative freedom that comes with a fantastical setting. All developers have different rules and philosophies about how far they're willing to go in terms of realism – taking liberties and making concessions in the name of making a game more fun.

For Assassin's Creed Valhalla, level design director Philippe Bergeron said the team had one goal: "[We] want to make sure that [the players] get the greatest hits of being a Viking." This meant identifying the iconic landmarks,

characters, and historical events before dropping them into a geographical map. "We took a top-down view of England," Bergeron says. "We knew for sure we needed to have Stonehenge and London. We also knew we needed to probably have York; it was like one of the biggest port towns back then ... and those White Cliffs of Dover, like on the southern edge of the map." In the end, Ubisoft Montreal decided to give each territory its own narrative arc, which would introduce you to significant places and figures through the main plot, but also hold its share of environmental storytelling to give each area its own flavor and feel.

You can't play through Sucker Punch's Ghost of Tsushima without noticing its serene beauty and striking locales. The team certainly did a lot of research into Japan and took inspiration from Akira Kurosawa films for its samurai tale, but it also wasn't afraid to punch things up. Sucker Punch took some of the most interesting pockets of the real-world island of Tsushima and expanded them to make its entire map look like the kinds of places

that would show up in someone's Instagram feed. For instance, take the Golden Forest; instead of having every type of tree that actually grows there, the team focused on using orange and yellow hues for the trees. "You can see it from across the island; it definitely stands out," says art and creative director Jason Connell. "It's not technically realistic, but it isn't not realistic either. Those are ginkgo trees, and trees like that do grow in that area. So it's got enough plausible reality."

Insomniac Games had one rightfully important feature drive how it built the world for its Spider-Man titles: the web-slinging. Having New York as its destination may have given Insomniac a template to work with, but the team had to think about traversal from the perspective of Spider-Man. Miles Morales director Cameron Christian said once the team started asking those questions and figuring out distances and heights, everything started coming together. "There was a lot of exploration early on, like how fast is our Spider-Man swinging?" Christian recalls. "And we started figuring out,



well, for every two swings, we want him to pass one large building ... and we started to get ideas for metrics and scale and size ... We played a lot to determine, where do we exaggerate heights to just make it interesting to swing across the city?"

For CD Projekt Red, narrative reigns supreme, and it tucks away certain threads within its worlds to pique your curiosity. In *Cyberpunk 2077*, the team used fixers and gigs to introduce you to the issues of the world. For instance, Regina represented the district of Watson and her gigs were an opportunity to learn about Night City's social issues, like cyberpsychosis among veterans. "We try to get gamers used to the fact that there is a story behind every corner and behind every player-activity in the world," says open-world director Bartosz Ochman. "These small narrative bites are interconnected with each other, sometimes like a spider's web, sometimes like Matryoshka dolls. You can consume them one by one, but if you go deeper into the stories behind them, you will see that they are part of the bigger picture."



Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales

Revealing The World

Once a player steps into a world, it's up to them to explore it and make discoveries. Throughout the years, developers have had many ways of providing indicators and icons for everything from side quests to minigames to treasure. Some games let you see the map and everything it offers all at once, others slowly reveal themselves, requiring you to visit a place or take down an outpost to see an area's offerings. Some gamers love having direction and a list of things to do before them, checking off one task after the next. Others love making their own discoveries, feeling more rewarded having stumbled upon gold or secrets. Developers are constantly experimenting with the best ways to unveil the map to players, and it's been fascinating to see the different approaches and how they worked for different experiences.

One of the more unique ways to find your way was recently done in *Ghost of Tsushima*, which had you following the wind to your desired destination on the map. Surprisingly enough, *Sucker Punch* didn't always have a guiding gust in the game, initially opting for a standard, minimal compass to follow. "What we ended up finding [was] a lot of people just stare at the compass or icons," Connell says. "[The wind] points you in a direction, but instead of looking up at the top of the screen ... you ended up looking at the world. You are more immersed, but it's giving you the same amount of information."

Sucker Punch took a minimalist approach to the information it put on the map for good reason; it created a breathtaking world, and the team wanted to keep you in it. Whether it was simply providing a question mark as a hint to an area you should explore or showing the rewards up front to entice you toward a quest, when you looked at the map, Connell said the team wanted it to be as simple and easy to use as possible so you got right back to the game. "The goal has to be: How can we keep you in the game world as much as possible?" Connell says.

Another challenge was figuring out the right amount of content density for a world that at times could be more contemplative. "We didn't want it to be like, 'Every 10 seconds there's something happening,' but for *Ghost of Tsushima*, it couldn't be every three minutes – that's too long," Connell says. "We want people to be satiated in their exploration and feel rewarded for that minute or two or 30 seconds of just going off in a direction." Speaking of those aforementioned question marks, Connell said they were a late addition because people wanted some direction toward discoveries, but the team didn't want to show its entire hand.



Assassin's Creed Valhalla

The Power Of Photo Modes

Photo Modes have become increasingly popular in the past few years, giving gamers a new way to interact with their virtual world and leave with a permanent souvenir to show off to friends. This fun mechanic has quickly become another activity and expected feature of our journey through worlds. Developers have certainly taken notice, adding new filters, poses, and sharing features. It also doesn't hurt that it comes with another big bonus: increasing engagement. "It gets people moving around the city," says *Insomniac Games* director Cameron Christian. "The resolution for games now is so high, and it just looks so awesome that people want to capture those images from the game. I think there's a big social-media component to it. It's a sense of creativity, and sharing [your] journey in a game in social media makes it feel more real in some [ways]."

Developers have also seen another benefit: It's helped players stop and smell the roses to truly take in the world's sights. "There are beautiful galleries of people just taking their time," says *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* art director Raphael Lacoste. "Even some people will tell me, 'Okay, I've been playing this game for 120 hours, but I've been spending almost 40 hours using the photo mode. It's really flattering for the team to hear that because it means that the work is really appreciated by the people who really take the time to just take photos and enjoy the meditative moments – playing with currents, and stuff like that.'"



That's the difficult part. Everyone has their own preferences in how they make discoveries and how much guidance they want. In *Immortals Fenyx Rising*, you have the farsight ability, which allows you to identify objects and activities in the world and reveal them on the map. Director Scott Phillips said the team tweaked how powerful this tool would be right up until the game went gold. "I feel like with farsight, we [didn't exactly] nail what I wanted to get," he says. "But we needed to make sure that people felt that the world had enough to offer them – that they continued to engage with it. I think where we ended is a bit too easy."

Assassin's Creed Valhalla changed up how the series categorized things,

providing different colors to indicate what might await you: wealth (gold), mysteries (blue), artifacts (white). "That was sort of to play with the notion of mystery," Bergeron says. "In the past, we would say, 'This is the blacksmith, this is a tomb, and this is a type of collectible.' Basically, it becomes a chore of 'I need to collect all the gems' or 'I need to collect all the blacksmiths.' We were removing that sort of identifier. It's like a Kinder egg. You're excited to open up that chocolate egg and see what toy is gonna be inside."

This aura of mystery also extends to the addition of World Events, special side quests you have to seek out before they appear on the map. These quickly won over fans due to the unique tasks and stories they add to your *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* journey, getting as silly as finding viper eggs so a woman can cut a nasty fart or being as heartfelt as shooting down a leaf to help a little girl move on with her life.

Bergeron compares the hidden World Events to the ambiguous question marks that dotted the map in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. "You didn't know what it's going to be, but you knew it was authored content and it was going to be fun," he says. "You trusted the developer to have put thought, effort, and love into it." It also allowed the team to add some levity to Eivor's adventure and not always focus on the undeniably violent and dark parts of the Viking era. "World Events sort of permitted us to see a different facet of [the Viking lifestyle], portray Eivor's personality in a different light alongside the people and how they live through all this. It gave us a bit more creative freedom than some of the more earnest stories would have."

The Rules Of Engagement

Developers spend their time crafting content, so it's no surprise that they think just as much about ways to draw players toward it. In *Immortals Fenyx Rising*, Ubisoft Quebec wanted things in the distance to catch your eye and compel you to seek them out. In many cases, environmental cues were used to highlight certain points of interest. "Rather than relying on the HUD as much, we would try to make those things visible in the world and use more glows and sparkles at night," Phillips says. "We'd highlight or put giant whirlwinds around things that would really call your attention just visually."

Most developers consider the main quest and your path through it when deciding where to place things. "We want to make sure that not only the location where the quest takes place maximizes the space, but also the trajectory that the player is probably going to be taking," Bergeron says. "If I think about where a quest ended and where the next quest starts, what's in between if I draw a straight line? That's probably where most players are going to go. We'll draw a bubble of the general environment and make sure that you're going through some of our 'greatest hits' of that territory and sort of tease you as you're going towards your next location. It's like, 'Oh, wait, I see something over there!' And then you go off track to see that thing."

Sucker Punch let players see the rewards, like a cool fire-covered sword, for completing "mythic" quests in *Ghost of Tsushima* as a way to entice them. "Rewards became a strategy for dangling the carrot," Connell says. "And then the journey was the cool 2D cutscene you get about the lore of the

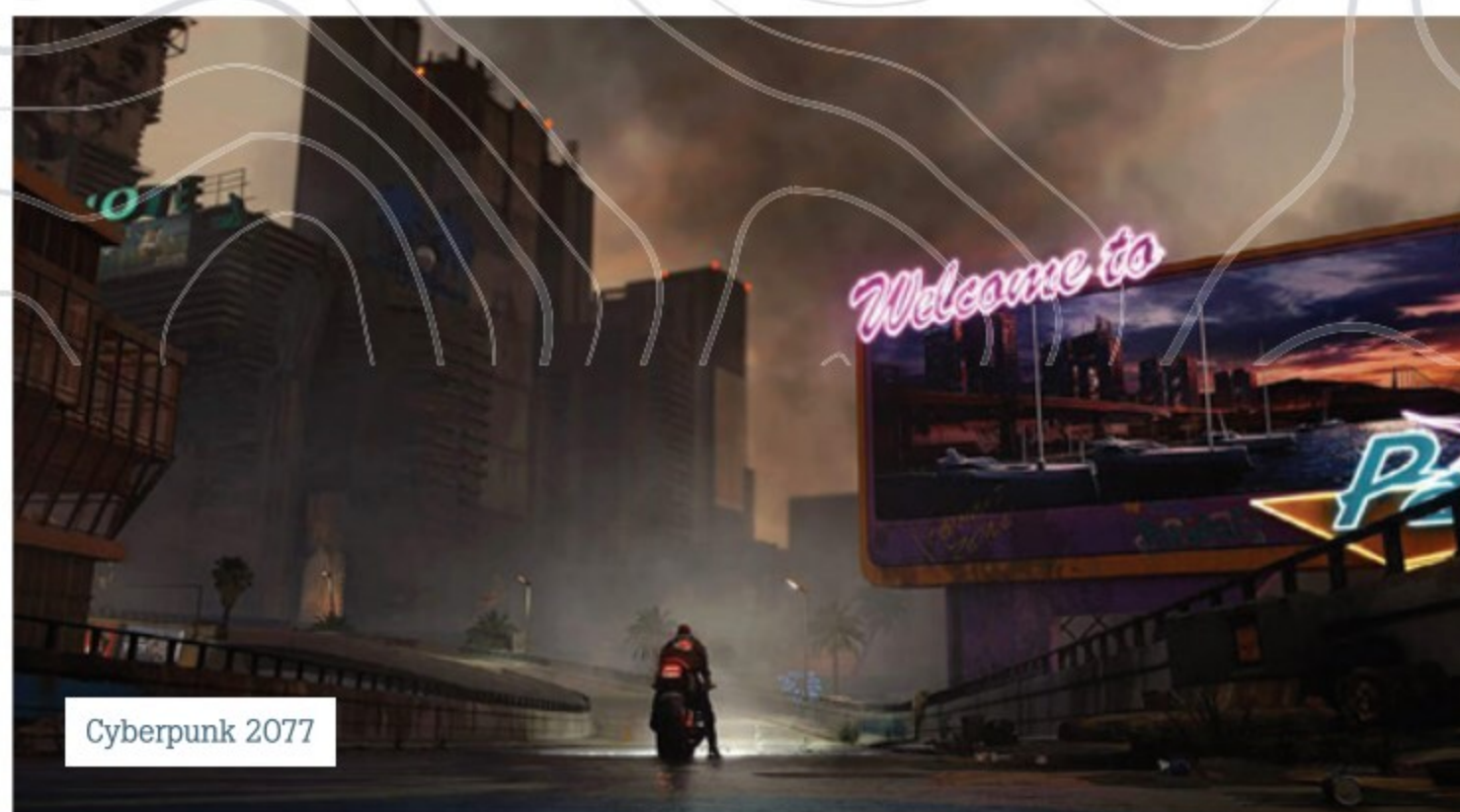
Those Marvel Easter Eggs ...

As we search game worlds, stumbling upon an Easter egg always feels rewarding and often gets players talking about their experiences. The Marvel universe provides Insomniac Games with plenty of opportunities in its *Spider-Man* games to give nods to the franchise and delight fans in these discoveries. Director Cameron Christian says these often come up organically as the team creates the game and there are no hard and fast rules for them or how many need to be scattered throughout a game. "There isn't any big planning," he says. "Events in the world happen, and we might put Easter eggs related to that, like the *Black Panther* movie came out while we were making the original *Spider-Man*, so we wanted to do some stuff related to that. Personally, I really loved the memorial statue to Stan Lee, especially seeing all the photo-mode stuff that came with it."

mission, finding out what happened, and the epic duel at the end. Then the excitement is no longer about a sword (even though that's a nice thing at the end), but it's [over] the cool character you met along the way, the mystery, the curse, or whatever the mission presented. I would rather give you the easy, fun, and mechanical thing up front and then saturate you in a 30-to-45-minute-long mission with a different type of storytelling and let that be the thing that stands out."

Of course, it's important to note different people are attracted to different things, and while most players aren't completionists, you still want to keep them in for the long haul. "Variety and quality are key here in keeping the player interested; we don't want players to feel like there is 'A content' to play, and these are part of the 'B content,'" says CD Projekt Red senior level designer Miles Tost. This also comes down to your reward for exploring; CD Projekt Red loves to leave breadcrumbs to follow that can often be as grand as opening a new questline, providing a legendary weapon, or even spotting a cameo from Hideo Kojima. "Small pieces of loot are actually hidden throughout the city without being outright mapped out to players," adds Ochman. "This is in contrast to *The Witcher*, where almost every treasure chest was marked on the map itself. It was a deliberate change, and we treat these as the ultimate reward for the most stubborn of urban explorers."

Insomniac stuck by what Christian calls the studio's number-one philosophy to get you noticing things: "It just needs to be fun to move around." While swinging in *Spider-Man*, crimes would emergently occur, Sable outposts could be seen in the distance, and special landmarks like the Avengers Tower would beckon you.



Cyberpunk 2077

When the movement feels that good, why not have it lead you to the content, which had everything from collectibles to underground hideouts?

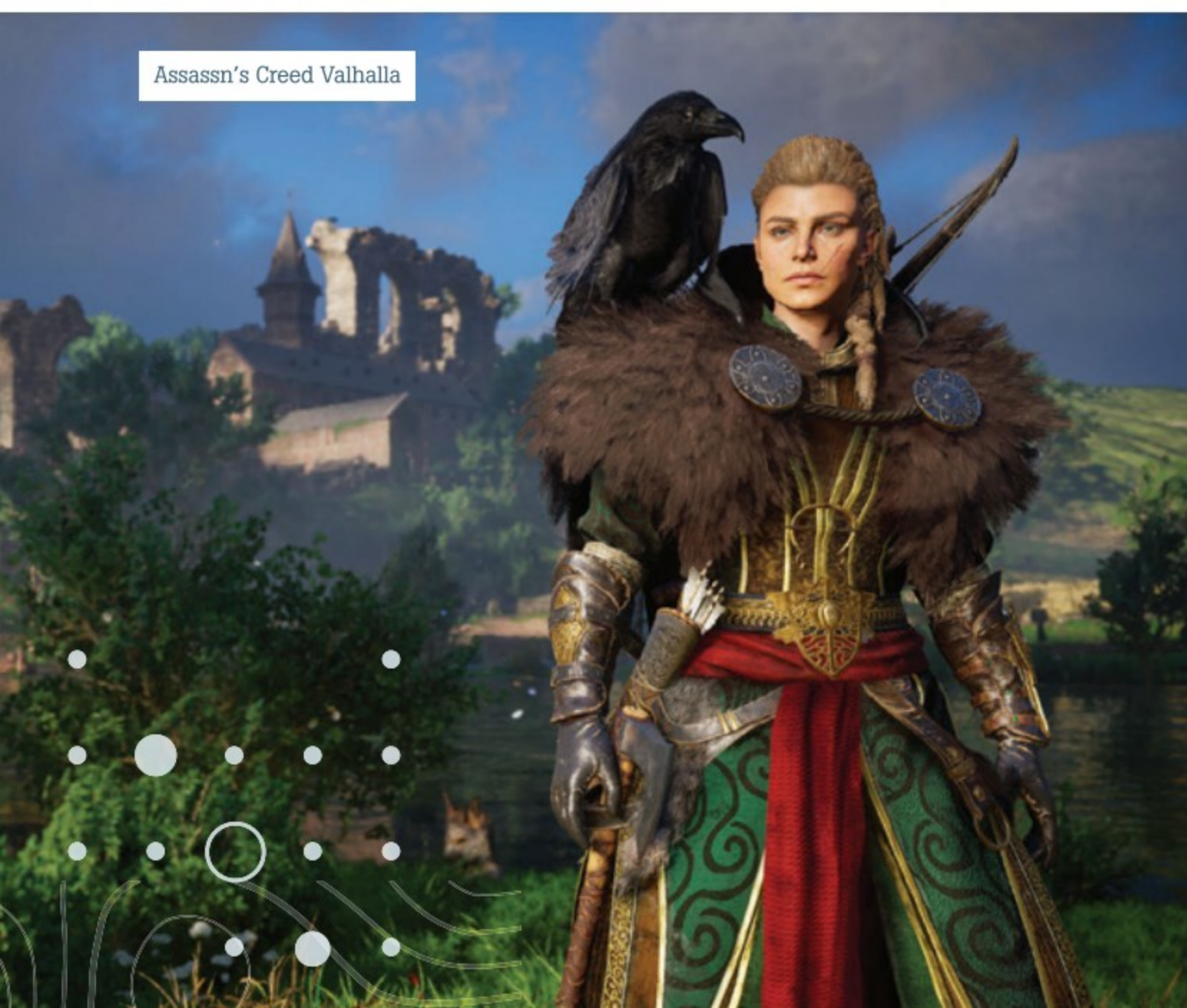
Truth be told, more thought and care go into distributing the content in a game than we realize. Sometimes, it's as simple as the density of the area playing into where things end up, e.g., a city would have more to do than a rural area. Other times, artists collaborate with quest designers, letting them know about places or landscapes they've built that are just begging for a quest. And sometimes small variations in things like time of day or gameplay level can alter what's available. "I can say that, for us, finding the right density of content and how to place it is more than simply throwing stuff onto a map and seeing what sticks," Tost says of CD Projekt Red. "It's a very meticulous process, which we spend a lot of time and thought on. This becomes clearer when you realize that part of the [Cyberpunk 2077] content in the city isn't fully static, meaning some activities appear only during a certain time of day or after other conditions, like reaching a certain Street Cred level are met."

A Bright Future

We've just entered a new era of console gaming with the PS5 and Xbox Series X/S. With new tech and an eye toward innovation, developers are already pondering how open-world games will evolve. "The future of open-world games ... I think it's a great time to ask that question," Connell says. "The most important part is embracing the question, and so that's where I'm at. And I think that a lot of people are thinking about it, whether it's designers, artists, gamers, or YouTubers. I like this question, because *Ghost of Tsushima* is so much about what a lot of people enjoy about exploration; a huge part of it is just about enjoying the world. [I'm] embracing the stuff that went well with it. Freedom and exploration in video games are tough, and I think it does pay off and people enjoy it."

After working on *Cyberpunk 2077*, Ochman says he started thinking about verticality and how it will play into the future. "I think the imposing scale added by a sense of verticality adds a lot to immersion, especially when you're on foot and taking in the city from the ground," he says. "And even now, I can see places where we could have taken even more advantage of this in *Cyberpunk 2077*. There's a lot that open-world games could do with verticality, including linking it to more dynamic quests, or tying it closer to the narrative. It's a pretty exciting prospect."

Throw in the new consoles' SSDs making load times almost obsolete and there's a lot of potential, such as transitioning between environments instantly for more variety and epic encounters. "Anytime you need fast travel, being able to just do it instantly is a huge game-changer," Phillips says. "Beyond that, I think everything is just a sort of a continuous increase in quality. And the more the world is well-realized and feels like a real place, I think the better off all the games will be – especially seeing as every one or two years, there's some amazing new thing that someone does that then everyone learns from. We are constantly growing as an industry." ❖



Assassin's Creed Valhalla

ASSASSINS

by Jeff Cork



Ezio Auditore da Firenze

Assassin's Creed II

As the best all-around assassin in a series filled with assassins, it only makes sense that Ezio tops our list. He skillfully blends combat prowess and stealth with a charming personality. His targets may not have known what was coming, but thanks to his trilogy of games we get a real sense of the person underneath the hood.



Quiet

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

A quick signal, a glint of a sniper rifle's optics, and another target is eliminated. Quiet may have started as an early Phantom Pain rival, but the silent assassin ended up being one of Snake's essential companions. Even if you don't buy into the reason for her skimpy uniform, one thing's certain: Thanks to her deadly range, few soldiers will be around to ogle.



Corvo Attano

Dishonored

Corvo is a deadly reminder of the cost of betrayal. After being framed for a murder and kidnapping, the former royal bodyguard sets his mind to revenge. Players can choose to take a lethal route or show mercy. Regardless of the path taken, Corvo demonstrates a mastery of subterfuge and an uncanny ability to make full use of his environment.



HK-47

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II

More like C3-PO'd? This deadly protocol-droid variant barely tolerates the player, and he isn't afraid to voice his dissatisfaction. Put him in combat, however, and his boundless enthusiasm for destroying organic life shines through. As quick with a withering quip as he is with a blaster, HK-47 is a prickly companion that's worth bringing along.



Thane Krios

Mass Effect 2

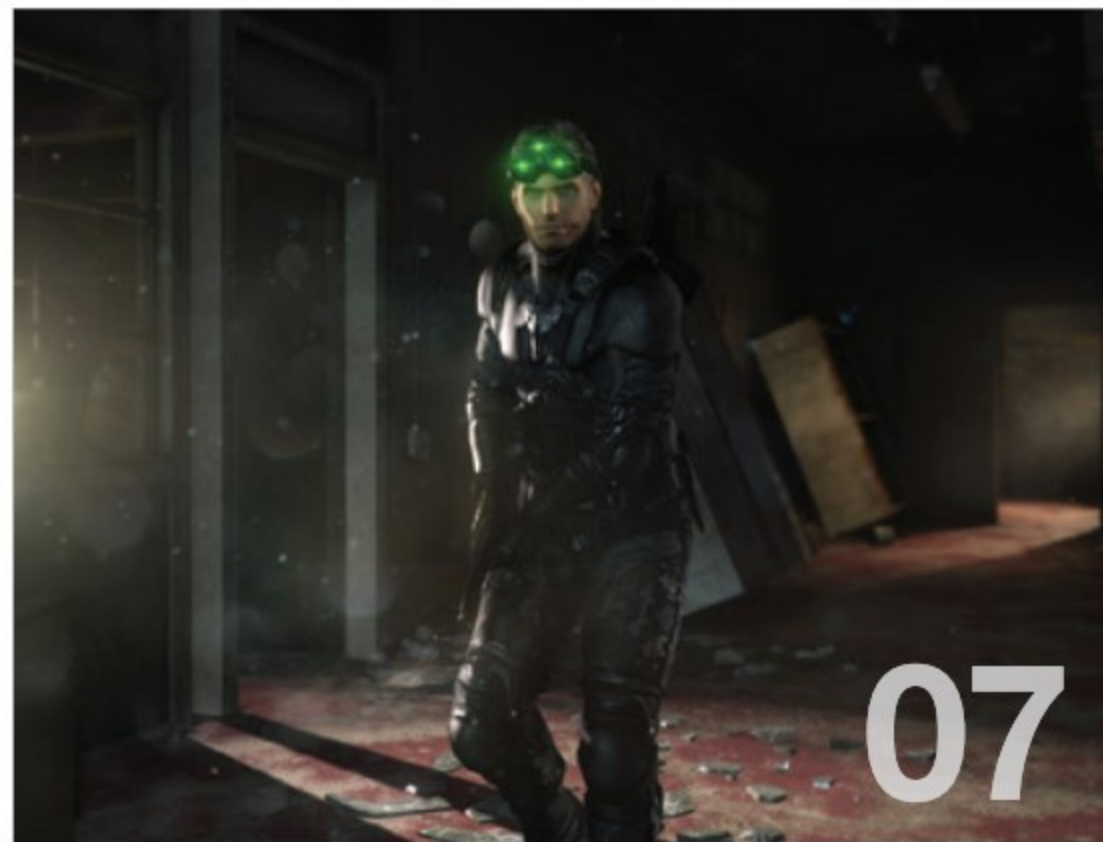
Thane is one of the most effective assassins in the galaxy, but he completes his duties with a sense of sorrow. After fulfilling a contract, he ritualistically asks his slain target for forgiveness. This hands-on approach also extends to his assassination methods, too. While others lurk in the shadows from a distance, he prefers killing at close range.



Rikimaru

Tenchu

Rikimaru was a ninja of impressive physical ability, but his passionate personality prevented him from achieving his full potential. Once he mastered the art of pushing his emotions back, he became unstoppable. It's probably not a great way to lead your actual life, but it's tough to beat the satisfaction of dispatching groups of enemies before they even knew he was there.



Sam Fisher

Splinter Cell

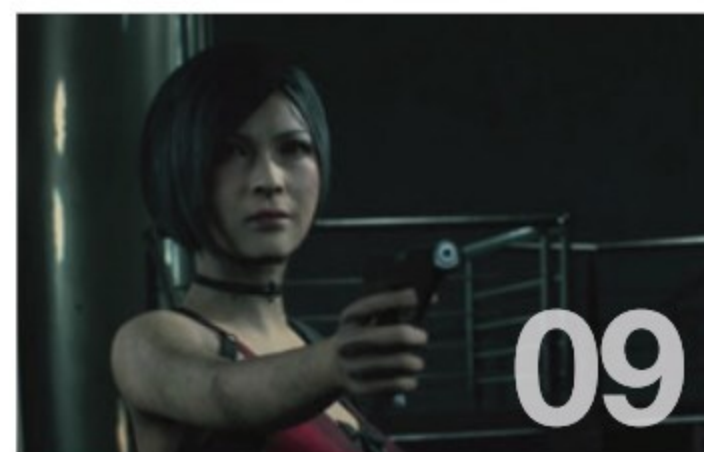
By the time you hear his night-vision goggles powering up, it's probably too late. This iconic stealth-action hero is the guy you want on your side. His ability to infiltrate high-security areas, take out targets, and slip out undetected puts him in good company with the others on the list. In terms of superior gadgets, however, Sam's in a league by himself.



Cicero

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

He may not look like much, but this weirdo in jester clothes is one of the most interesting characters in Skyrim's Dark Brotherhood storyline. He's bringing the Night Mother to a new resting spot, but that's only part of the story. His journals share a tale that includes palace intrigue, grave desecration, and plenty of sneaky, sneaky killing.



Ada Wong

Resident Evil 2

Ada Wong is simultaneously intriguing and aggravating. Is she working with you or against you? Judging from how easily she points guns in your direction, the answer seems clear. But then again, she does seem to like to throw rocket launchers your way when you need them the most. She's an elegant and mysterious figure in a world that, let's face it, is pretty gross otherwise.



Samus Aran

Metroid

Samus' résumé may say "bounty hunter," but, but let's face facts: Have you ever seen her take a target alive? If it looks like an assassin, acts like an assassin, and melts alien scum like an assassin, we're pretty sure we know what we've got here. She's one of the best at doing what she does, even if what she does isn't exactly clear. 💎



Keeping The Arcade Fire Alive

Publisher Team17 is working with three arcade museums across the world to aid preservation efforts, while promoting its upcoming Narita Boy

Decades ago, arcades were a place for social gatherings. In their dimly lit halls, you could play the latest coin-op machines, challenge other players to head-to-head competitions, or simply soak up the atmosphere – chiptune noise, dark lighting, sticky carpeting, and all. Part teenage hangout spot, part public menace (for some adults, at least), arcades occupy a fond place in our memories for those of us fortunate enough to have been around to enjoy them.

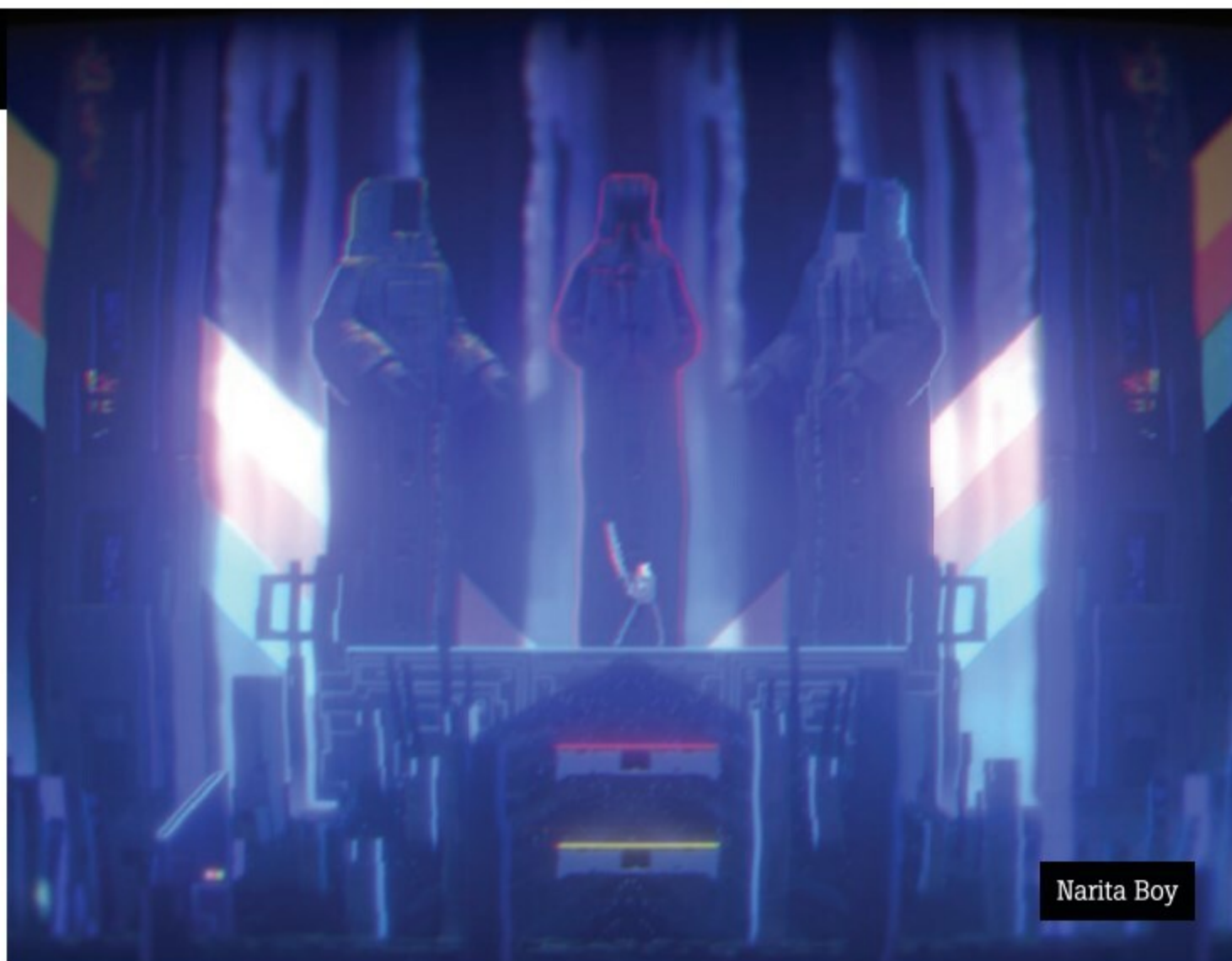
The arcade industry has had to transform itself as home consoles became more powerful. No longer able to compete on sheer visual fidelity alone, coin-op manufacturers have turned to huge screens and redemption-machine

gimmicks to draw in customers. And the arcades themselves have fragmented. Some offer family fun-style all-in-one entertainment centers, with laser tag, bowling, batting cages, and other activities bundled with an array of game machines and pinball tables. Others have added food and alcohol to the menu, along with a nostalgia-stoking selection of classic games from the '70s and '80s.

There will likely always be a place for arcade games, but it's an industry with its most robust years in the rear-view mirror. And, like many industries, COVID-19 hasn't done it any favors. Arcades were among the businesses that were temporarily shut down as governors across the country put their states on lockdown. Unlike restaurants

and bars, which have their own set of unique challenges, there isn't a take-out solution to help mitigate the economic damage. The experience is about being there, after all.

A variety of museums across the globe recognized the fragile state of our arcade heritage and have been working to preserve that history. In a bit of perverse synchronicity, those museums – which are doing their best to show attendees why the legacy of the arcade industry matters – have themselves been blindsided by the pandemic. Attendance is necessarily down thanks to social-distancing guidelines – if they've even been able to keep their doors open to the public. Fortunately, a little help is on the way, and it's coming from an unlikely place.



THE NATIONAL VIDEOGAME MUSEUM

The National Videogame Museum is an independent museum based in Sheffield, South Yorkshire. It opened in November 2018, giving attendees a chance to play games while learning about the historical context in which they were created. As Conor Clarke, marketing and communications director for the museum puts it, COVID was a devastating development for the museum.

“We were basically reliant on ticket sales to keep the museum afloat, to pay the bills and keep the lights on,” Clarke says. “We’re a museum that people come in, and they expect to – and we want to – give them a controller and then play a game, or they go to our Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles cab, or something like that. But we realized that’s a lot of touch points, there’s a lot of things that people are going to be touching that someone else has touched earlier in the day, and 10, 20, 30 people might have touched that controller that day. We realized it wasn’t responsible or safe to be running that kind of venue. So we closed prematurely and then they called the national lockdown.”

The museum’s staff thought it would only be about three weeks, but it obviously wasn’t. As time stretched on, the museum held a fundraising campaign and then slowly worked to reopen its doors – while ensuring that safety protocols including social distancing were being met.

A CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION

Team17 is a UK-based company perhaps best known for its Worms series. In recent years, it’s turned its attention to publishing, too, bringing titles like Yooka-Laylee, Overcooked, and The Escapists to the market. In February, the company announced that it was publishing Studio Koba’s upcoming game Narita Boy, which had been the focus of a successful Kickstarter campaign.

Narita Boy is a flashy, retro-style adventure featuring pixelated graphics, a synthwave soundtrack, and a killer transforming weapon. The story conceit is that a young boy gets transported from our world into this digital realm, where he has to battle hostile A.I.s while searching for the creator of this strange virtual place. It very much wears its ’80s influences on its sleeve, from its neon palette to an art design that harks back to classics like Another World.

As publishers, Team17 had an interest in spreading the word about the game, but the company wanted to do something more altruistic with its campaign, too. It devised a program called Saving the Arcade World, in which players could help raise money for arcade preservation by participating in a variety of fundraising efforts (see sidebar). Money raised would then be split equally between three different museums: The National Videogame Museum in the UK, The Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York, and Arcade Vintage Museo del Videojuego in Spain.

“Arcades and arcade games are synonymous with the 1980s, so it made sense for us to highlight such an important part of the games industry at a time when we’re losing it to history,” says Andrew McKerrow, brand manager for Narita Boy. “Narita Boy’s aesthetic and synthwave soundtrack is

a romantic love letter to that time long before today’s modern and omnipresent digital world. We felt compelled to highlight the importance of preserving the industry’s family tree by maintaining accessibility to arcades for the public thanks to the incredible work of museums around the world like The National Videogame Museum, The Strong, and Arcade Vintage.”

We spoke with representatives from each of those three museums to learn more about how they’re working to preserve arcade history, as well as why they feel that such efforts are important in the first place.



The museum focuses on historic and contemporary games, with exhibits that touch on everything from arcade games to a social-history project that's compiling peoples' personal stories from Animal Crossing: New Horizons. One of the museum's more striking exhibits is called Platform 14, which features a bank of 14 monitors displaying Donkey Kong in its various incarnations. Players can sit and enjoy Nintendo's original arcade hit, and then pivot to 13 different ports to see how it transformed as it made its way onto the NES, Game Boy, ZX Spectrum, and other consoles.

One of the programs that the NVM is working on, Clarke says, is something called the Videogame Heritage Society. The VHS is being designed to give preservationists across the UK an easily accessible resource network, where they can be in contact with their peers. "It's about basically providing a kind of expertise in a network where preservationists can discuss how to preserve and the best practices in preserving video games. There isn't, as far as I'm aware – and this is particularly true of arcades as well – there isn't any one concerted effort to preserve this stuff."

The goal for the VHS is to host digital events, too, where people can present their work and share best practices for preservation. "It's an open invite to anybody that might have their own personal collection at home that they want to know how best to preserve it, too," Clarke says.



THE STRONG

The Strong National Museum of Play has the largest charter of the three museums in the Saving the Arcade World campaign, with a reach that extends to the entire concept of the word "play." Everything from sticks (including Lincoln Logs), G.I. Joe, Barbie, video games, and pinball machines are housed under its roof. It's also home to a vast collection of gaming ephemera and historical artifacts, including a trove of Atari's prototypes and design documents so large it had to be transported to Rochester, New York, in a tractor trailer.

Jon-Paul Dyson, vice president for exhibits at The Strong and director of its International Center for the History of Electronic Games says that preserving arcade machines poses its own set of challenges. For instance, what do you do with arcade games that run on CRT displays? "No one makes those anymore in the world," Dyson says. "How do you continue to rehab that monitor? We actually have a stock of spare ones that we acquired before the last factory shut down."

Dyson says that Martin Reinhardt, the museum's conservation technician in charge of maintaining the machines,

How You Can Help

To learn more about the National Videogame Museum, its mission, and how you can support its preservation efforts, visit thenvm.org



Jon-Paul Dyson, director of the International Center for the History of Electronic Games, and curator Shannon Symonds look over some of The Strong's gaming collection



How You Can Help

To learn more about the Strong Museum, its mission, and how you can support its preservation efforts, visit museumofplay.org

does an amazing job, but that he's been most impressed with how robust classic arcade games are. They're designed to be pounded on, unlike, say, home consoles. "Early on, before we put arcade games out, one of the first things we tried putting out was an Atari 2600. And I remember that the joystick broke within a day. It was not meant to be used by hundreds or thousands of guests in one day. But these arcade machines really just keep going."

That's not to say that they're indestructible. Some of the rarer machines in the museum's collection of more than 300 games aren't available for the public to play. "We're not going to let people play the original Asteroids prototype," Dyson says. "That would not be responsible."

Because of the way people play with arcade machines, preservation can take a different path than you might expect. Rather than renovating machines to like-new status, Dyson likens the process The Strong incorporates to maintaining a historic house. For instance, you may need to replace the lead pipes, but you'd keep the leaded glass. "It's the same thing with arcade games," he says. "Do you try to restore it to that original state, you know, like how it rolled off the factory floor? Or do you honor the cigarette burn that's on the control panel, because that's part of its provenance and history?" Some things are modified for safety reasons, such as replacing potentially hazardous power supplies or rewiring cabinets so operators don't get zapped when they unlock the coin doors. "An operator [from that era] would know for some of the older machines how to avoid that, but someone who's not trained in that?"

The Strong is also home to several pinball machines, which pose a unique set of challenges. "Gravity don't lie," Dyson jokes. "No matter where you go, it's mass times acceleration, and a lot of damage happens in that physical world."

The museum has managed to reopen after closing for three months, albeit with reduced hours and additional safety precautions. Arcade machines are one-on, one-off, to maintain social distancing. And the site is installing new air-filtration systems in addition to constantly cleaning the machines that people are touching. "That's, frankly, a real financial hit for organizations that are trying to preserve this history," Dyson says. "I think [Team17] approached us and these other organizations saying, 'Hey, what can we do to try to help this cause that we think is important to preserve the history of video and arcade games and the arcade games themselves? The funds that will be generated from this will be used to help with that process of preserving the arcade experience.'"





ARCADE VINTAGE MUSEO DEL VIDEOJUEGO EN IBI

Studio Koba, the developer behind Narita Boy, is based in Spain, so it only made sense for the Saving the Arcade World campaign to turn its attention to its home country. For that, Team17 enlisted the help of the Arcade Vintage Museo del Videojuego en Ibi, in Petrer, Alicante. The museum – the first of its kind in Spain – hosts an annual ArcadeCon event, while giving visitors a chance to play and learn about arcade games and their history.

“Our main goal is to promote, preserve, and make the arcade culture known to most people,” says Joaquin Litarte, who co-founded the museum in 2013 with his brother Jose Maria. Unsurprisingly, the pandemic has been hard on the museum.

“Due to COVID-19, we have closed the museum since March 2020. Our income has been drastically reduced; it is very hard to continue like this. We need to continue working on projects for the museum, such as arcade restorations, online talks, social networks, and the maintenance of all the material exhibited in the museum, among many other things.”

Although times have been difficult, Litarte remains passionate about the need for preserving arcade history. “Preservation is vital to understand the entire history of video games in general, especially arcade games, because they were the pioneers in their technology and their industry,” he says. “It is very important to remember where we come from, and to be able to analyze the evolution of the video game industry. The last 50 years have been exciting. Our museum is the ideal place for it, where people can share the emotions, ideas, and feelings – in addition to playing!”

How Does It All Work?

There are several different components to the Saving the Arcade World campaign. First, a track from Narita Boy’s soundtrack, “Saving the World,” is available on Spotify and other streaming services. If you like it, you can purchase it from digital retailers such as iTunes and Amazon Music. All royalties from those purchases through the end of March will go into the campaign. Team17 is also planning a digital charity event this spring, during which a percentage from each game sale will go toward the campaign.

Team17 is also producing a special Narita Boy: Techno Edition of the game, which is about as limited as a limited-edition can be. This one-off includes a custom built, full-size Narita Boy arcade cabinet with the game preinstalled, a special custom controller, downloadable codes for all versions of the game (PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC), and a copy of the soundtrack. It’s still finalizing the price for this special edition, but all profits from its sale will be put into the campaign as well.

On social media, the three museums involved in the campaign (The Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York, The National Videogame Museum in the UK, and Arcade Vintage Museo del Videojuego in Spain) will be using the #SavingTheArcadeWorld hashtag on Twitter to share the importance of arcade preservation and what each museum is doing to work toward that goal.

Once the campaign is finished following Narita Boy’s launch, the three museums will split the pot equally, with the money earmarked toward their arcade preservation work.



How You Can Help

To learn more about the Arcade Vintage Museo Del Videojuego, its mission, and how you can support its preservation efforts, visit museoarcadevintage.com



Visitors to Arcade Vintage can choose from a wide selection of classic machines to play



WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Each of the three museums is taking different steps toward preservation, whether it's maintaining a collection or establishing a network for preservationists to share their knowledge. They all share a common goal, however: ensuring that players will be able to experience a valuable part of our gaming past, whether or not they were around during the heyday of arcades.

As great as playing games at home can be, there's something that arcades can offer that's impossible to replicate. Whether it's coming face-to-face with the imposing bulk of a coin-op cabinet, the tactile sensation of jamming an arcade joystick around, or the sensory overload of hearing dozens of machines call your name at once, a living room just can't compete.

Eduardo Fornieles, head of Narita Boy developer Studio Koba, sums it all up quite nicely: "Narita Boy had to be a tribute to my childhood. I realized that my love for retro aesthetics came from the emotional connection I had with arcade games in the late '80s. I have forgotten lots of things throughout my life. Yet the smell of fried food or the sound of children playing back in the arcade remain vivid memories, which is why we're glad to support the great work of the museums and their preservation work." ♦



A large part of the arcade experience is playing with other people – which is something these museums can help replicate

Inside Blaseball

How The Game Band saved itself by goofing around

During season 10 of Blaseball, the Baltimore Crabs faced off against the Charleston Shoe Thieves. The game started like almost any game of baseball, as each team's pitcher took turns trying to strike out the other squad's roster of hitters ... but then something unexpected happened. Former all-star Tot Fox stepped up to the plate and hit a home run for the Crabs that sent their run total to 10. This kicked off a chain reaction: The sun collapsed, the moon was swallowed, and a black hole formed overhead that ate the Crabs' 10 runs, allowing the Shoe Thieves to win the game.

The Baltimore Crabs vs. Charleston Shoe Thieves is a memorable Blaseball game, but it is far from unusual. In fact, it's almost pedestrian, because the annals of Blaseball are bursting with amusing stories that break the rules of reality. Blaseball might share some fundamental similarities with America's Pastime, but in many ways, the two sports could not be more different. In Blaseball, teams have inherent traits that make them fireproof or electrify their skin, peanuts occasionally rain from the sky, and each player's pitching stats are composed of skills like unthwackability and Shakespearianism. There is no crying in baseball, but in Blaseball, anything goes.

For those unfamiliar with the new sport, Blaseball is a free, browser-based idle game where fans use fake money to bet

on the outcome of simulated baseball-like games. Dozens of games are played each day, so seasons only last a week, but that means something wild is constantly happening as the sport continually evolves. Blaseball is intentionally absurd because it sprang up in the middle of the pandemic – during a time when real sporting events were getting canceled and postponed – and its developers, The Game Band, hoped it would be a force for bringing people together during an isolating time.

For many, however, Blaseball is more than a diversion; it's become an obsession. Early on, fan enthusiasm for The Game Band's absurdist baseball league was so great that the studio struggled to keep the servers from being overrun. Within weeks of release, a legion of fans was exhaustively detailing the game's wikis, complete with backstories for hundreds of fictional Blaseball players, chat forums were filling with speculation about the underlying code that determines the winner, and the team started receiving an ongoing collection of fan art confirming the community's desire to ship certain characters together romantically.

The Game Band was as surprised as anyone by Blaseball's overnight success. To better understand this odd phenomenon, we spoke with several members of the studio who detailed Blaseball's heartbreaking origins and explained how this strange little browser game has fundamentally changed their company in unexpected ways.

by Ben Reeves



Founder Sam Rosenthal holds a team meeting with the rest of The Game Band crew

STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE

Video games made Sam Rosenthal a better student. When Rosenthal was still in high school, he took a multimedia design class where he discovered the flash game Flow, designed by Jenova Chen, who went on to form thatgamecompany (Journey, Sky).

“It was Jenova Chen’s thesis project at USC,” Rosenthal says. “And it was my first exposure to both experimental game design and games’ academia. That game had his thesis attached to it, where he explained what he was trying to express. I remember that it was very meditative and beautiful, and it was different from a lot of other games out there.”

Rosenthal realized that he also wanted to make games that were different from the norm, and he decided that he would go through USC’s game-design program, just like Jenova Chen. For the next few years, Rosenthal worked hard to improve his grades so that he could ensure his acceptance into the program. While at USC, the young designer tinkered with a concept for a puzzle game where players built houses out of playing cards. “I made this game to express fragility,” Rosenthal says. “I was using this metaphor to describe fragile lives, and cards felt like classic game pieces, so it seemed like there was something there.”

After college, Rosenthal set the house of cards idea to the side as he tried to find his place in the industry. He interned briefly at Disney Interactive, where he worked on the mobile game Where’s My Water, then he was hired by Toys for Bob to work on the Skylanders franchise before finally joining Giant Sparrow during the development of What Remains of Edith Finch. Throughout all those adventures, however, Rosenthal couldn’t get his idea for a

game about a house of cards out of his head, and he continued to work on the project during nights and weekends.

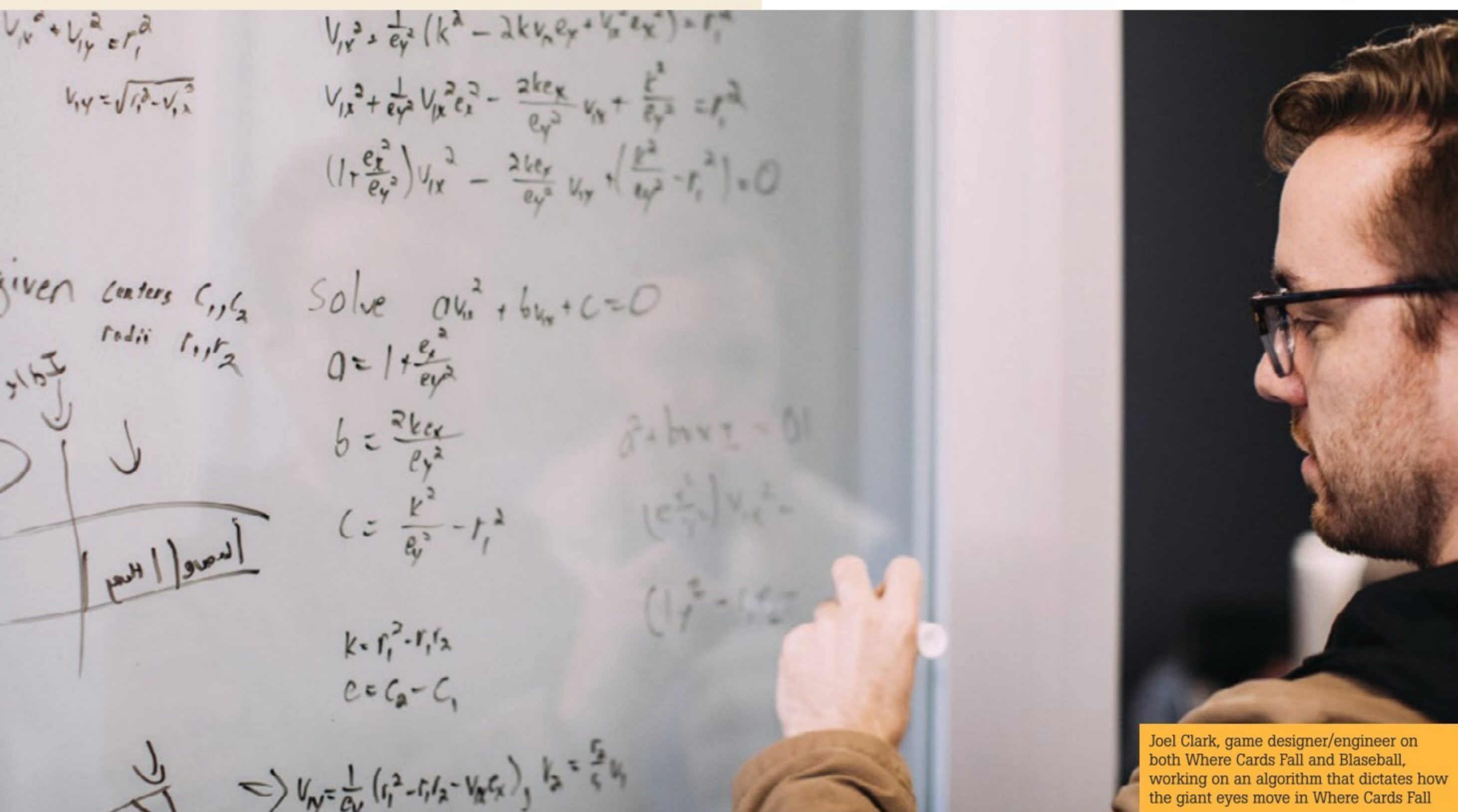
“I didn’t want to make power fantasies or games where you’re killing people,” Rosenthal says. “There are so many studios doing that really well already, and I felt like it was a very primitive approach to what games can be. There’s so much that we haven’t explored yet with the medium, outside of the realm of that one particular feeling that people have been diving into for a while. I wanted to see what else was out there, and the best way to do that was to start a studio and start exploring

on my own.”

In 2015, Rosenthal founded The Game Band and hired a few college friends to help him further develop his house of cards concept. That idea eventually became the Apple Arcade title Where Cards Fall, which received moderate critical praise when it launched in September 2019. The Game Band’s deal with Apple Arcade helped the studio keep the lights on for a time, but the struggles of an independent studio were soon apparent, and the pressure to land another publishing contract threatened to send Rosenthal’s new studio collapsing like a house of cards.

Internet League Blaseball

The Good League			The Evil League		
Lawful Good			Lawful Evil		
	San Francisco Lovers	0-0		Baltimore Crabs	0-0
	Unlimited Tacos	0-0		Philly Pies	0-0
	Dallas Steaks	0-0		Hellmouth Sunbeams	0-0
	Kansas City Breath Mints	0-0		Mexico City Wild Wings	0-0
	Chicago Firefighters	0-0		Hades Tigers	0-0
Chaotic Good			Chaotic Evil		
	Charleston Shoe Thieves	0-0		Canada Moist Talkers	0-0
	Boston Flowers	0-0		Houston Spies	0-0
	Hawaii Fridays	0-0		Miami Dalé	0-0
	Yellowstone Magic	0-0		Seattle Garages	0-0
	New York Millennials	0-0		Breckenridge Jazz Hands	0-0



Joel Clark, game designer/engineer on both *Where Cards Fall* and *Blaseball*, working on an algorithm that dictates how the giant eyes move in *Where Cards Fall*

PLAYING HARDBALL

Rosenthal built The Game Band around the idea that it would reinvent itself after each project. “My favorite bands, like Radiohead, are known for not doing the same thing twice,” Rosenthal says. “They come out with a brand-new sound or something that redefines what they are, and I think that’s very exciting. It’s something you don’t really see in the video game space.”

Where Cards Fall had been a cutesy indie puzzle game for mobile devices, so Rosenthal hoped the next project would be something completely different. The studio even felt like it was on the right track. In early 2020, The Game Band had all but locked down an important publishing deal that would keep the studio up and running for years, but when the entire world went into lockdown in March of that year, the publisher got cold feet, worried that the market could potentially collapse. The Game Band’s deal went up in smoke.

“That devastated us,” Rosenthal says. “The

games industry can be pretty ruthless. You’re out there, you’re always trying to sell yourself, and you’re only as good as your last project ... We didn’t really have another plan. We immediately started trying to get a plan B off the ground, but sadly, I had to – over Zoom – lay off most of the team. It was incredibly gutting. This team was very close. Everybody at The Game Band loved working together, so that was the hardest and worst part of my career, by far.”

Rosenthal continued to scramble to put together new project pitches, hoping that he wouldn’t have to lay off the rest of the company in another few months. “The conventional wisdom is that the fastest you can get a deal is six months, and that was how much time we had, so I began to panic,” Rosenthal says. “I asked a mentor of mine, ‘What should I do?’ and he said, ‘Why don’t you stop chasing money, and just make something that you and your team can make really well in a short amount of time?’”

Like most of the rest of the country, Rosenthal was spending a lot of time on Zoom calls, as

social experiences migrated online. Several of Rosenthal’s friends wanted to play makeshift online versions of classic card/board games, and Rosenthal wondered if he could get his friends engaged in a social simulation game where people gathered around a singular event. Rosenthal figured that horse racing would be the perfect theme for this kind of project. He envisioned that players could use a virtual currency to bet on simulated horse races, and between races, they could gather online and talk about their exploits.

However, when Rosenthal pitched his horse race idea to the rest of the team, it didn’t go over well. No one else at The Game Band was excited about the concept ... until someone on the team said, “What about baseball?” For whatever reason, several people at the studio got excited about the idea of simulating absurdist baseball games.

“[Designer and engineer Joel Clark] said, ‘Okay, if we do this, it has to be called something dumb like *Blaseball*,’ and that was it,”



Rosenthal says. “After that, [designer Stephen Bell] started texting me all these things like, ‘Hey, can we have an umpire assassinate a player like in The Naked Gun film?’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, sure.’ As I kept saying yes to all his requests that encouraged him to keep jumping in with insane things.”

SWINGING FOR THE FENCES

It only took a few weeks for The Game Band to cobble together the base code for Blaseball. After all, the game isn’t much to look at. The Blaseball web portal is a simple black screen with a miniature scoreboard showing balls, strikes, outs, and a short play-by-play of each game. Most of the game is conveyed through text, but those who pay attention to all this text begin to understand the larger narrative that The Game Band has been telling about its absurdist baseball league and its descent into cosmic horror.

Blaseball features a gambling system where fans spend their virtual winnings (there is no real-world monetization in Blaseball) on a variety of things, such as passive buffs that help them earn more money. One of the most important things that people can buy are votes, which they cast in elections to add new league rules at the end of every season. However, new rules often come bundled with unforeseen consequences. At the end of the first election, for example, players voted to open the Forbidden Book, but as soon as the book was opened, a massive eclipse obscured the sun, the league’s star player Jaylen Hotdogfingers was incinerated, and a Hellmouth swallowed the entire Moab Desert.

The story that The Game Band is telling with Blaseball is an emergent narrative. For its designers, Blaseball feels like one giant game of D&D, where The Game Band is the Dungeon Master and the Blaseball community are the players who constantly improv new scenarios and help the game evolve in unexpected ways.

“As an example of how Blaseball expanded, I always say that season one was basically a baseball simulation and then in season 10 the fans rallied to raise a team from the dead and kill a peanut god,” says writer and designer Stephen Bell. “Another example is that the fans of the Los Angeles Tacos decided to trap their entire pitching rotation in peanut shells, which would prevent them from playing Blaseball altogether. A lot of it seems like the fans going, ‘What if we did this? Would this break the game?’ And it’s on us to prepare for those edge cases and make sure Blaseball can continue.”

Blaseball was initially a side project, but it has grown so quickly that it’s become a big focus for The Game Band. The studio’s Patreon account has gotten a much-needed infusion of cash, and the team has even experimented with integrating ads into the experience. All of which has relieved some of the studio’s financial pressures, allowing the team to continue working on Blaseball for a long time to come. Which is a good thing, because the team has a lot of ideas to implement.

“This feels like the beginning, more than anything,” Rosenthal says. “Blaseball came out so quickly, and it had like .1 percent of what we wanted it to have, and it shows. The site could



barely handle the traffic – it couldn’t handle the traffic in its early stages. But now that we have an audience, we get so many requests for this, this, and this. We want to do all the stuff fans are asking for plus so many things that aren’t on anybody’s list. So, I think there’s so much more that we can do with this game.”

This next era of Blaseball is all about expansion, says Rosenthal. Later this year, the team plans to roll out Stadiums, and fans will be able to vote on renovations for their ballparks to further crystalize each team’s identity. Blaseball is also getting three new teams, The Worms, Georgias, and Mechanics. Meanwhile, a new weather type, called flooding, threatens to cause some chaos, and fans should soon become aware of a new horror circling somewhere in those deep waters.

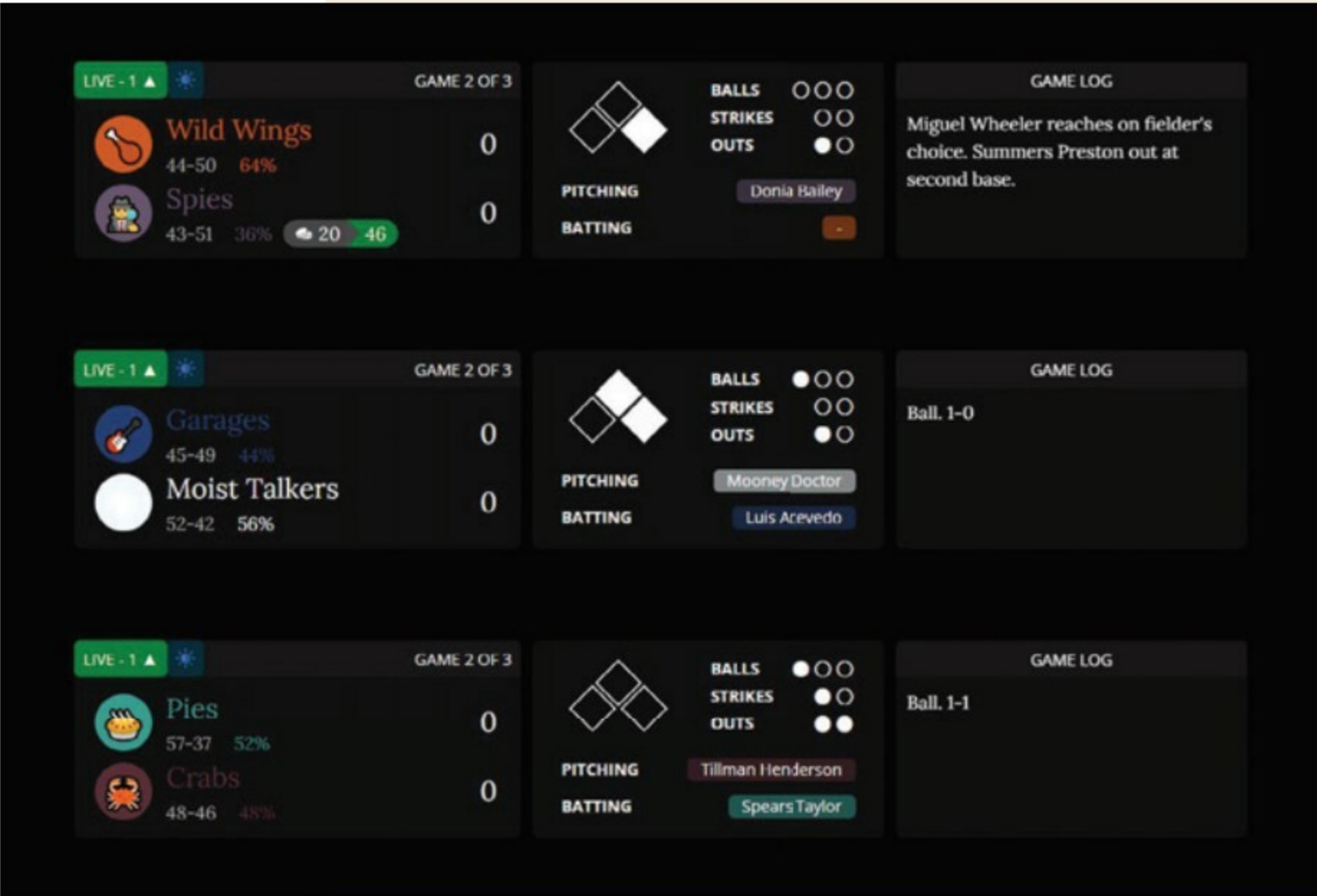
Other new systems will challenge longtime fans while allowing more casual players to keep up with things. For example, tarot cards were recently drawn for each team, and upcoming

seasonal readings could help shape the future of each team, but players will have to play the game to find out if these are real prophecies and learn who exactly is doing the reading.

ENTERING THE MAJOR LEAGUES

Blaseball is currently still in beta, but the team is working hard to bring it to a state where it’s comfortable removing that tag. At the same time, The Game Band isn’t resting on this success. Even as the company supports Blaseball, the studio is already looking ahead, toward its next project.

“What I hoped for, is that as we continue to make more games that are true to our original vision, that our games continue to reflect the world we live in, but they are also all different from each other. I hope that whatever becomes the third game for The Game Band, that people look at it and are like, ‘Okay, this is not like Where Cards Fall. This is not like Blaseball, but I can see the spirit of the studio working on it.’”



SPRING BUYING GUIDE

Have a gamer or collector in your family with a birthday or graduation coming up? Or maybe you're just looking for fun reward for yourself after an especially long winter? Whatever the situation, we gathered some of our top recommendations for gadgets, toys, clothing, board games, and more, sure to appease even the most discerning enthusiast.

by Matt Miller and Ben Reeves



1 Pulse Red Xbox Wireless Controller

Add some spice to your new Xbox console with this newly released color scheme. No matter the hue, the controller's hybrid d-pad and sturdy feel wins the compatibility race, with cross-functionality on Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, PC, or mobile.

\$64.99 | xbox.com

2 Samsung Galaxy Buds Live

\$109 | samsung.com

Tech

TV & AI



3



4



3 Cybershoes Gaming Station

Control movement and rotation in VR with this fascinating new solution, as your leg movements correlate directly to in-game actions. The station can also be enabled as a fitness tracker, so you can find out how far you've been running through virtual space. Sadly, there's no way to track how silly your partner or roommates will think you look.

\$399 | cybershoes.io

4 8Bitdo Arcade Stick for Switch & Windows

\$89 | 8bitdo.com

5 iPhone 12 Pro

Starting at \$999 | apple.com

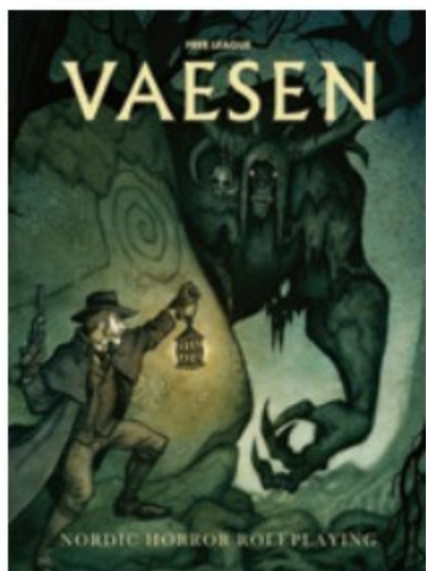
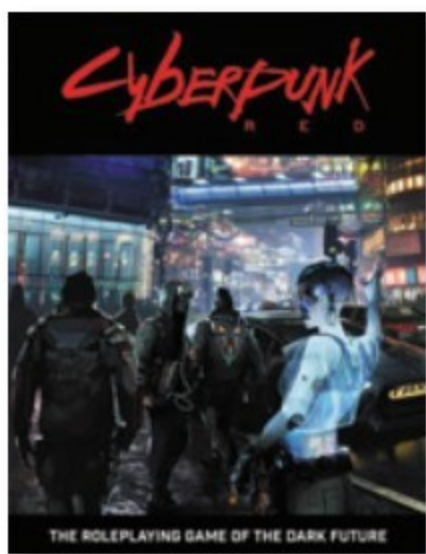


Doctor Who: Revolution of the Daleks
\$24.98
shop.bbc.com

The Legend of Korra – The Complete Series Steelbook Collection
\$97.99
nickanimation.com

The Lord of the Rings: The Motion Picture Trilogy (Extended & Theatrical) (4K Ultra HD)
\$89.99
warnerbros.com

Soul
\$29.99
disney.com



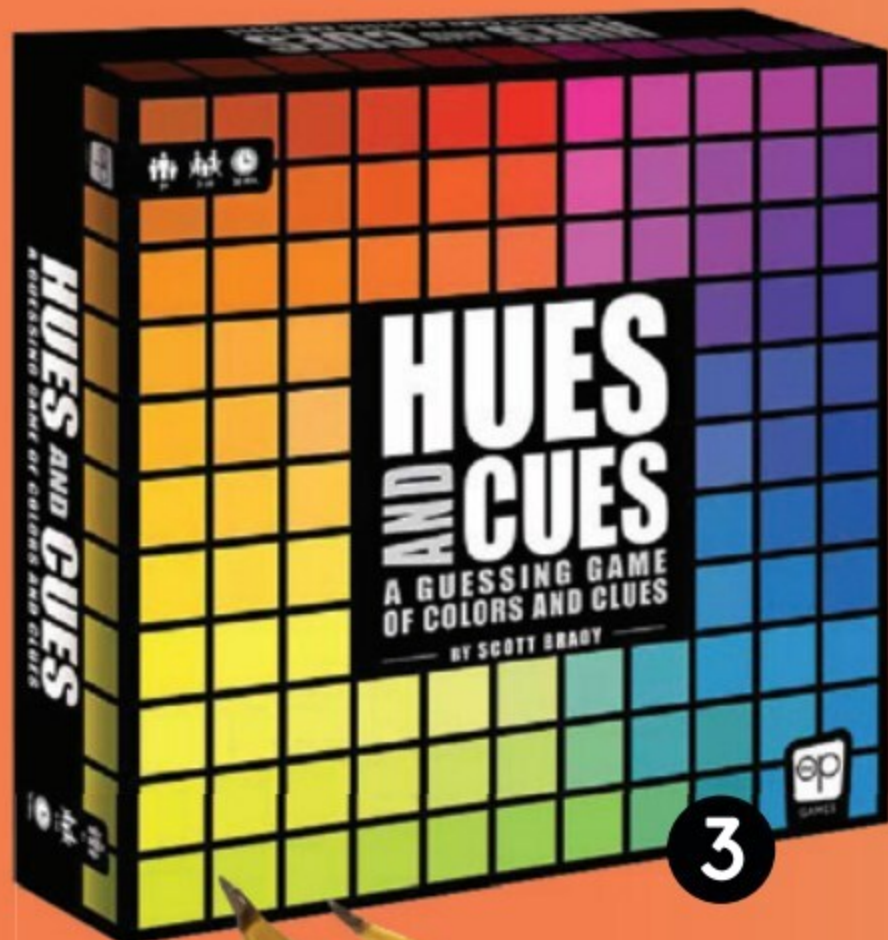
Cyberpunk Red
\$60.00
rtalsoriangames.com

D&D: Candlekeep Mysteries
\$49.95
dnd.wizards.com

Ptolus: Monte Cook's City by the Spire
\$149.99
montecookgames.com

Vaesen: Nordic Horror Roleplaying
\$54.83
frialigan.se

Tabletop



Stellar
card storage



1 BBB Card Case

\$72.99 | cardkingpro.com

2 X-Men: Mutant Insurrection

This cooperative dice-driven card game lets you choose between 16 of the most memorable Children of the Atom as they set out on scenario-driven missions. Story elements creep in to the action-focused throwdowns, including an incredibly clever system that governs relationships between the mutant heroes; don't let a long camaraderie turned betrayal stop you from halting Magneto's schemes.

\$54.95 | fantasyflightgames.com

3 Hues and Cues

\$24.99 | theop.games

4 Pathfinder Battles: Darklands Rising Miniatures

The sold-individually gargantuan gold dragon is undoubtedly the showpiece of the latest Pathfinder mini line, but the randomly packed four-figure booster features an impressive selection of larger figures, with a specific focus on monsters and characters from the deep underground of Paizo's sprawling fantasy world.

\$89.99 (Great Wyrms Gold Dragon),
\$19.99 (Standard Booster) | wizards.com

5 Bloodborne: The Board Game

\$99.99 | cmon.com

Apparel

MUSIC

1 Animal Crossing Dodo Airlines Jacket

\$79.99 | store.nintendo.com

2 SNES Hats

\$39.00 | gamerhats.com

3 The Last of Us Part II – Joel's Flannel

Insert Coin specializes in an impressive array of officially licensed gaming gear, including this attractive and subtle nod to everyone's favorite adoptive dad. Thankfully, the shirt is modeled for how Joel looks prior to any ski-chalet visits.

\$50.61 | insertcoinclothing.com

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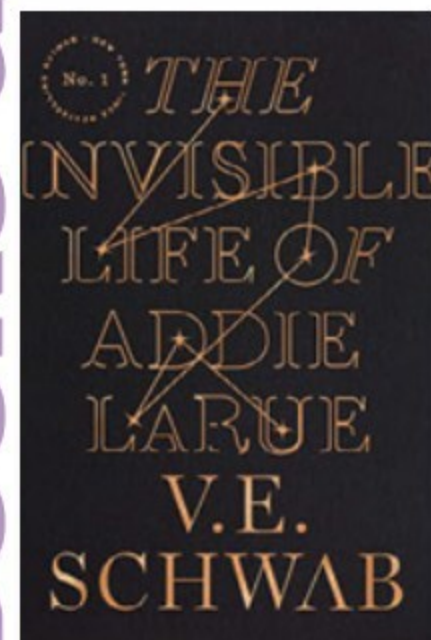
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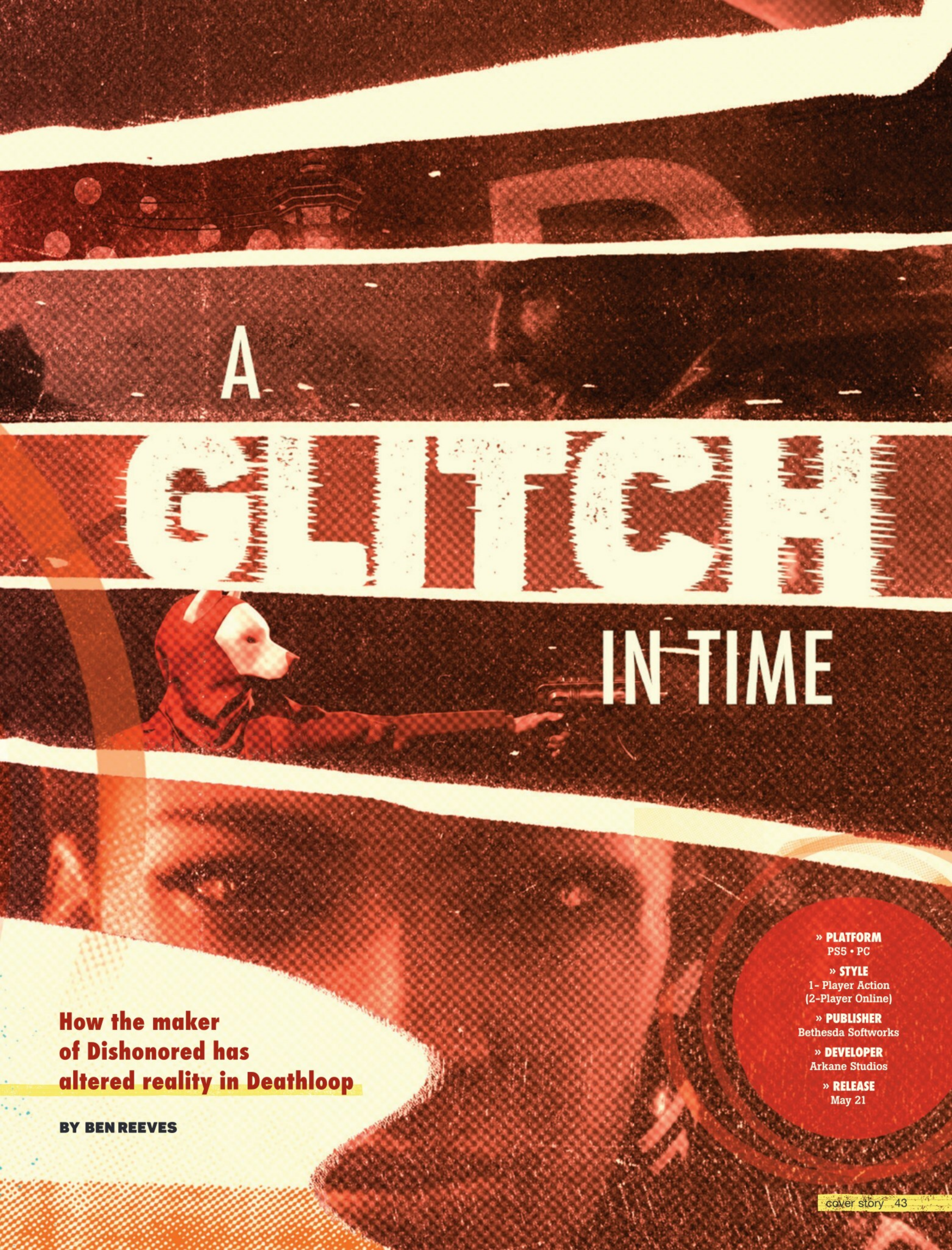
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A GLITCH IN TIME

**How the maker
of Dishonored has
altered reality in Deathloop**

BY BEN REEVES

» **PLATFORM**
PS5 • PC

» **STYLE**
1- Player Action
(2-Player Online)

» **PUBLISHER**
Bethesda Softworks

» **DEVELOPER**
Arkane Studios

» **RELEASE**
May 21





Trapped on a frozen island and hunted by hundreds of mask-wearing madmen, Colt Vahn's life has become a living nightmare. And, this nightmare never ends. Every 24 hours, the cycle repeats and Colt's battle begins again. There's only one way out of this time loop: Colt must assassinate eight of the world's most powerful individuals ... and he has to do it before this island drives him insane.



LIVING ON BORROWED TIME

It's morning on Blackreef Island, and Colt has just emerged from the underground tunnels that wind their way across this desolate landmass. Colt just woke up, but he's already ready to collapse. His legs feel heavy; his arms are dead weights. A hangover from the night before is beginning to ease, but Colt's real troubles have only begun. So, Colt fights through the pain – pushes against entropy – and presses deeper into the island. He knows he's marching toward his own death, but he has no other choice. If Colt wants to get off this blasted rock, he must orchestrate a seemingly impossible series of assassinations in less than 24 hours.

The first name on Colt's list is Frank Spicer – a security specialist and wannabe rockstar. Frank is currently holed up inside a makeshift casino that he's nick-

named The Rambling Rock Club. Finding Frank's club is easy; getting inside is the hard part. As Colt looks down on The Rambling Rock Club from a nearby ridge, he sees several guards patrolling the outer perimeter of the complex. A handful of stationary turrets scan the terrain, ready to spit lead at any unauthorized personnel who wander near Frank's funhouse.

Colt sets his sights on the front door of the building and prepares his Shift Slab, a piece of physics-breaking tech that allows him to teleport across short distances. Colt "shifts" past a turret and up behind a patrolling guard. Then, in one smooth motion, Colt takes a machete to the guard's back. The sentry crumples to the ground before dissolving into a barely visible form of energy that glistens like water in the sunlight. Colt doesn't know why the dead transmute like this, but one thing is certain: Reality on Blackreef is broken.

The coast to The Rambling Rock Club is now clear, so Colt sneaks up to the front door. He's free to enter, but there's a catch. Frank is an incredibly paranoid individual, so anyone who enters his club must wear a Slab-inhibiting wristband, which means Colt won't be teleporting his way through Frank's club. Colt straps on the wristband and withdraws a silenced pistol then fires a test shot. It looks like the wristband doesn't affect Colt's ability to use firearms, which is bad news for Frank.



Colt kicks open The Rambling Rock Club's front door and takes down two guards before they even realize what happened. Unfortunately, one of them shouts for help before he dies and the room soon fills with goons from the upper floor. Those first two guards were free; Colt is going to have to work for the rest, so he switches over to a shotgun and plows his way through the crowd. Colt is making good progress, but he's slowly being overwhelmed. Without the use of his Slab powers, Colt can't make a quick escape, and one of Frank's goons catches him off guard. Colt feels the bullets tear through his chest and he knows it's over. Seconds later, his vision fades to black. Colt is familiar with this feeling: This is death.

A moment passes. Then Colt wakes up on a black sandy beach – a hangover screaming in his head. It's morning again on Blackreef Island. Colt pushes through the pain to stand. Frank got the better of him that time, but this ordeal isn't over. If Colt wants to cross Frank off his list, he'll need to learn a few new tricks, and he'll need to study all of the ins and outs of this island.

STARTING A NEW LOOP

From a young age, game director Dinga Bakaba was tinkering with game design. Bakaba's father, Sidiki Bakaba, is a well-know actor and filmmaker from West Africa's Ivory Coast, so even when Bakaba was still in diapers he was instilled with an appreciation for arts and entertainment as well as the power that stories have on people.

"I've spent a lot of time inside imaginary walls," Bakaba says. "I spent my whole childhood being told stories before bed-time. My father would improvise one story per day ... And sometimes it would be interactive, 'But daddy, what if he didn't get the teddy bear?' You know, I would

ask a question, and he would still improvise something. I don't know where he found the inspiration because it is very hard. Then, when I was older and discovered tabletop RPGs, I immediately wanted to be a dungeon master. I didn't even want to play the games. I wanted to make people play the games."

As Bakaba grew, he began to modify popular board games like Space Crusade and make his own Magic: The Gathering cards. That modding hobby eventually turned into a career creating new games, and for nearly a decade Bakaba has worked at Arkane Studios, helping shape the Dishonored series almost the entire time. Dishonored is a critical darling, and he had a blast working on such a unique property. But after nearly 10 years exploring the Empire of the Isles, Bakaba and the rest of Arkane felt that it was time for something new.

"One thing that came up early was that this time we wanted to do something very focused," Bakaba says. "With Dishonored, there is this whole empire with a lot of different cultures and characters and political factions. We wanted something a bit more focused, a bit John Carpenter if that makes sense. We wanted to make something like *The Thing* – to explore one station somewhere in the Great North where there is a group of scientists and one event that's happening to them. We wanted to work on a story that doesn't care about the rest of the world."



Deathloop takes place entirely on Blackreef Island, an isolated landmass in the north Atlantic with a history of strange phenomenon similar to the Bermuda triangle



COULD DEATHLOOP COME TO XBOX CONSOLES?

Right now, *Deathloop* is slated to hit the PS5 and PC, but Microsoft is currently in the process of acquiring Bethesda Softworks, which owns Arkane. This has led many to speculate that *Deathloop* will eventually make its way over to the Xbox Series X/S. An official Bethesda spokesperson said, "The acquisition hasn't affected day-to-day development of *Deathloop*, which we're developing exclusively for PlayStation 5 on console and also PC." But that doesn't mean that the title couldn't migrate to Microsoft's consoles at a later day. Hopefully we'll hear more about that possibility after the PS5 release.



Aleksis Dorsey is one of the wealthiest people on the planet. He owns a giant mansion on the island and loves to throw wild parties

Inspired by *The Thing* and other films like *Escape From New York* and *The Running Man*, Arkane began to dream up an isolated science-fiction narrative about a man being hunted by everyone on an island. Around the same time, several of Arkane's artists found another source of inspiration: the real-life Faroe Islands. This North Atlantic archipelago is located about halfway between Norway and Iceland, and its subpolar oceanic climate offers a harsh and striking backdrop. Inspired by the Faroe Islands, Arkane created Blackreef, a

foreboding isle full of black-sand beaches, jagged cliffs, and frosted waters so close to the edge of ice that their waves look like Slurpees.

The final element of Arkane's new world clicked into place when Bakaba and the team settled on the game's unusual campaign structure. Arkane is known for creating rich systemic games where players solve puzzles and are free to approach combat challenges in a number of unique ways. However, in a single playthrough, people rarely get to see how deep these

systems run or how many branching paths snake through the world. Bakaba thought that if the studio created a reason for players to replay sections of its game over and over again, then players would have a deeper appreciation for Arkane's sandboxes. That's when the team hit on the idea of a time loop. All of the characters in *Deathloop* would be trapped in a repeating cycle of death that forces them to relive the same day over and over again. Better still, this nightmare would be a hell of their own making.

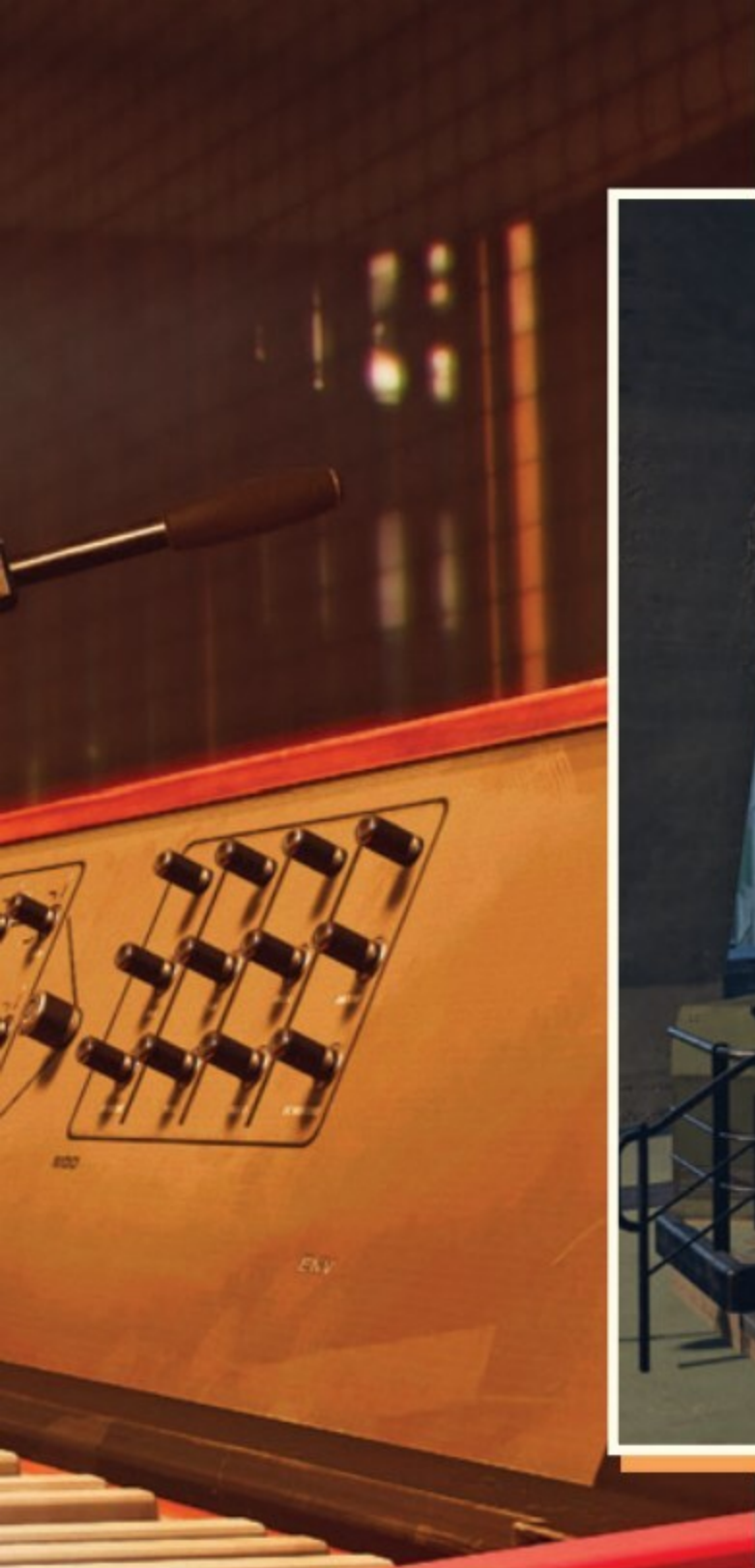
WRITING ON THE WALL

As Colt explores Blackreef Island, he'll notice a series of messages written across the environment. These messages appear in big, bold text, and sometimes vibrate in place, almost as if some invisible hand is trying to communicate with Colt. These messages often offer helpful tips or highlight areas that Colt should explore further. Arkane wouldn't go into detail about these strange texts or who's behind them, but the studio says that Colt is the only person who can see them and that they may play an important role in helping him break the loop.



Frank Spicer is an ex-mobster with big dreams of being a rockstar. He runs a daily radio show from a casino he built on Blackreef, but he also helps manage the island's security.





DANCING WITH DEATH

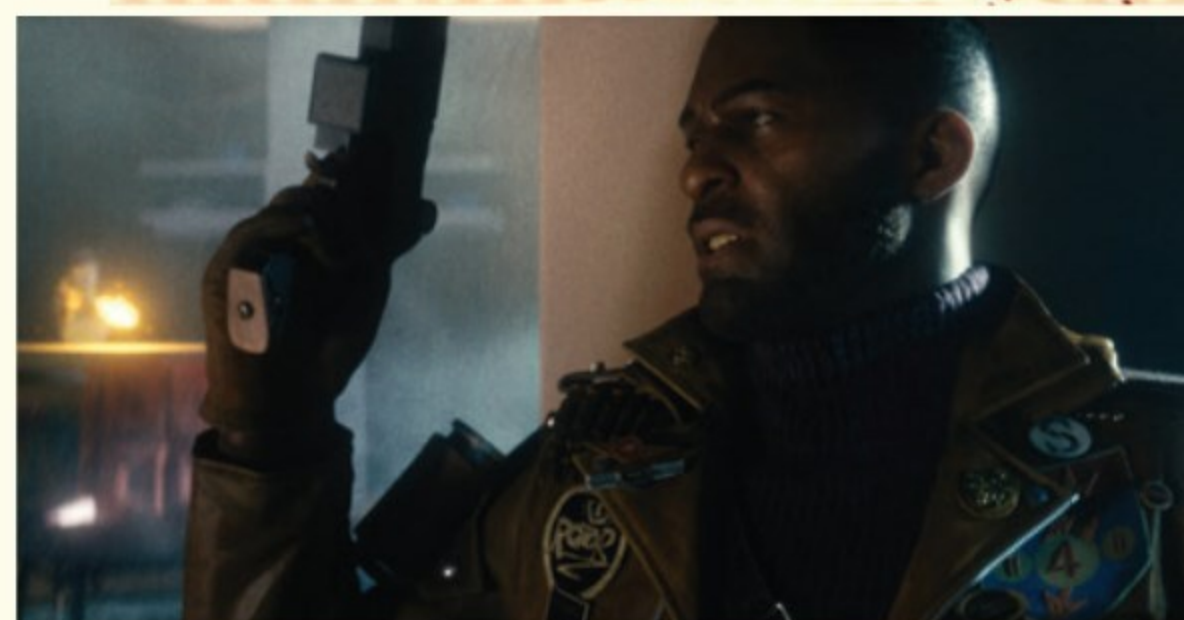
It's morning on Blackreef Island, and Colt has just emerged from the underground tunnels that wind their way across this desolate landmass. His hangover from the night before is beginning to ease, but his real troubles have only begun. If Colt wants to escape this timeloop, Frank Spicer needs to die. But this wannabe rockstar is currently holed up inside a makeshift casino in a section of the island called Fristad Rock.

Finding Frank's club is easy; getting inside is the hard part. Fristad Rock is Blackreef's port, and it's teeming with security. Fortunately, Colt has done this before, so he knows it's practically suicide to run through the front door guns blazing. Instead, he skirts the edge of the compound looking for an alternative route. It's time to put his Slab powers to good use.

In addition to the teleporting Shift power, Colt also has Slab powers that make him temporarily invisible or allow him to assume the appearance of someone else, both of which come in handy while sneaking around the environment. Additionally, each Slab has four potential upgrades, two of which can be equipped at any given time. These Slab upgrades even stack on top of each other, meaning there are a lot of potential ways to mix and match abilities. For example, Shift can be modified so that when it's activated Colt hovers in mid-air, giving him extra time to pick a destination, or a chance to rain fire from the sky. Another Shift upgrade allows Colt to swap places with a character. Naturally, anyone who swaps places with Colt is left disoriented for a few seconds, and if Colt times his Shift properly, he can teleport his target directly off the side of a cliff.

Using Shift, Colt makes his way around the side of Frank's club and discovers an air duct, providing access inside without the need for any Slab dampeners. Colt's Slab power could come in handy in the club, but without one of Frank's wristbands, the club's internal doors won't open for Colt, restricting his movements. It seems like a worthwhile trade-off this time, and Colt navigates his way through Frank's labyrinthine club, eventually making his way up to the second floor.

This area of the club is highly guarded, but Colt has one more Slab power to test out: Nexus. This unique ability links the fates of characters together, so if one character takes damage everyone else linked through Nexus suffers the same amount of damage. Alternatively, if one linked character is launched into the air, the rest of the gang follows suit. Nexus can be upgraded so the attacks home in on their targets, or Colt can lob a grenade-like blast that automatically links characters within a certain radius. Using Nexus, Colt connects four of the club's guards. One headshot later, the area is secured. Frank better watch out, he's about to get Slabbed in the face.



THE ISLAND AT THE CENTER OF REALITY

Blackreef Island has a curious history. For centuries, it was a source of legends and taboo. Similar to the Bermuda Triangle, it formed a legacy as a place where things worked a little differently. Those who knew of Blackreef would tell stories about castaways who washed ashore, then had strange encounters with themselves. In the '40s, the government set up a few military bunkers on the island hoping to study its strange phenomenon, but when the military pulled out, the island sat deserted for years. It wasn't until the '60s that someone finally cracked open the island's secrets.

Egor Serling is an arrogant pseudoscientist obsessed with strange phenomena and urban legends. After this brilliant crackpot learned about Blackreef, he convinced a wealthy benefactor to bankroll a series of experiments on the island. While

tinkering with the island's strange physics, Serling made a few startling discoveries. "It starts with small things, but the very first thing that they were able to do was to make those little Trinkets, which defy reality," Bakaba says. "Some of these make you jump higher or make your weapons suddenly shoot gas instead of bullets and stuff like that."

As Serling's crew continues to manufacture new Trinkets, they eventually craft objects of even greater power, which they nickname Slabs. While Trinkets augment the abilities of a person or item, Slabs allow people to harness the wild energies of the island. However, Serling's biggest discovery comes when he realizes that he can break time itself. Serling and his companions invent a way to form a time loop, which leads them to theorize that anyone on the island can relive the same day over and over again, effectively attaining eternal life.

"That was immediately when they said, 'Hey, wait a minute! So, we can just not die? This is even better than we thought,'" Bakaba says. "So they started the AEON program. This is like an ark that will preserve the brightest minds in the world – the most wealthy people in the world ... They're thinking, 'We can really go to the bottom of the reality of the world because we have all the time in the world to study this anomaly and study metaphysics, so whenever we want to come out of this thing – if that's possible – we will come out as gods.'"

Unfortunately, the time loop doesn't function as expected. This is where Colt's story picks up. Deathloop opens just after the AEON scientists have flipped the switch and created the time loop. Colt wakes up on a black-sand beach with no memory of his life up to that point and a terrible hangover from some forgotten wild party the night before. Everyone on the island thinks that this is the first day of the time-loop experiment, but Colt knows that the AEON program has been running for some time. The entire island is trapped in a repeating cycle, and Colt is one of the only people who can retain his memories from one loop to the next.

Before long, Colt learns that in order to break the loop he'll need to assassinate the eight founders of the AEON program – known as the Visionaries – all within a single loop. Twenty-four hours and a list of eight names. This isn't going to be easy, but Colt has all the time in the world.



Colt has access to a set of underground tunnels, which he can use to travel from one area to another





LIVING WITH BORROWED TIME

It's morning on Blackreef Island, and Colt is working his way through the underground tunnels that wind their way across this desolate landmass. His hangover from the night before is beginning to ease, but his real troubles have only just begun. If Colt wants to escape this time loop, Frank Spicer needs to die ... again.

Fortunately, Colt has done this before. Using his encyclopedic knowledge of the island, Colt knows that there are five possible entrances into The Rambling Rock Club. This time, Colt takes the low road, entering the club through the underground tunnels he's been using as a shortcut between locations. Throughout his journey, Colt has also learned how to exploit a loophole in the repeating cycle, which allows him to assess the gear and Slab abilities that he acquired during previous loops. Colt is currently equipped with Trinkets that allow him to double jump and regenerate health more quickly. He also has enough weapons and Slab powers to take down a small army, which is good because Frank's club is a fortress.

Since Colt isn't wearing a Slab inhibitor wristband, the doors within the facility won't open automatically for him, but Colt

knows how to deal with that. He takes out a hacking tool and reprograms the door. Seconds later, it gently slides open. On the other side of the door is a motion-sensing turret. Colt hacks that, too, and the turret turns on a couple of patrolling guards. One more enemy stands between him and his destination, so Colt takes out a grenade and flips through its alternate settings, turning it into a trip mine. He then uses a nearby jukebox to create a distraction. When the guard comes to investigate, the unsuspecting fool walks right into Colt's trap.

Frank is located safely behind bullet-proof glass inside a recording booth at the center of his club. On another part of the island, during a previous loop, Colt discovered the security codes to Frank's estate, so he could travel to the junction box outside and use those codes to shut down the entire complex, which would unlock the recording booth's doors. But Colt doesn't want to make the trip outside. Instead, Colt sneaks around behind the booth and finds a maintenance panel. Hacking that panel also unlocks the doors to Frank's studio. Now, nothing is standing between Colt and his target.

At this point, Colt could rush into the

studio and activate his Havoc Slab, which gives him steel skin, turning him into a human wrecking ball. Or he could set up another trip mine, so the next time Frank sets foot outside his recording studio, he ends up a stain on the wall. In the end, Colt decides to go with an old favorite and uses Nexus to link Frank's fate to his bodyguards', then Colt lets loose with a rapid-fire shotgun.

The battle is over in a matter of seconds. As Colt surveys the wreckage, he notices that Frank dropped a weapon called Constancy Automatic. All eight Visionaries have their own unique weapon or Slab power, which Colt can use after he takes them off the board. Frank's unique weapon is an SMG that houses two magazines-worth of ammunition, which means Colt can fire the weapon while reloading, creating a nonstop stream of destruction. Colt takes the gun. It could come in very handy. After all, he still has seven names to cross off his list, and he's burning daylight.



Slabs are rare pieces of technology that grant superhuman powers. Using Slabs, Colt can turn invisible, throw enemies psionically, or teleport across the screen



HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

Sébastien Mitton has worked at Arkane Studios for more than 17 years. In that span he's seen the company go through more than one hard time. Before Bethesda purchased the developer in 2010, Arkane struggled to keep the lights on as it bounced from one canceled project to the next. In the mid-2000s, the studio prototyped a Half-Life spinoff that explored the headcrab-filled mining town of Ravenholm. Not long after that project was canned, the team worked on an Area 51-inspired collaboration with Steven Spielberg called LMNO that also never saw the light of day.

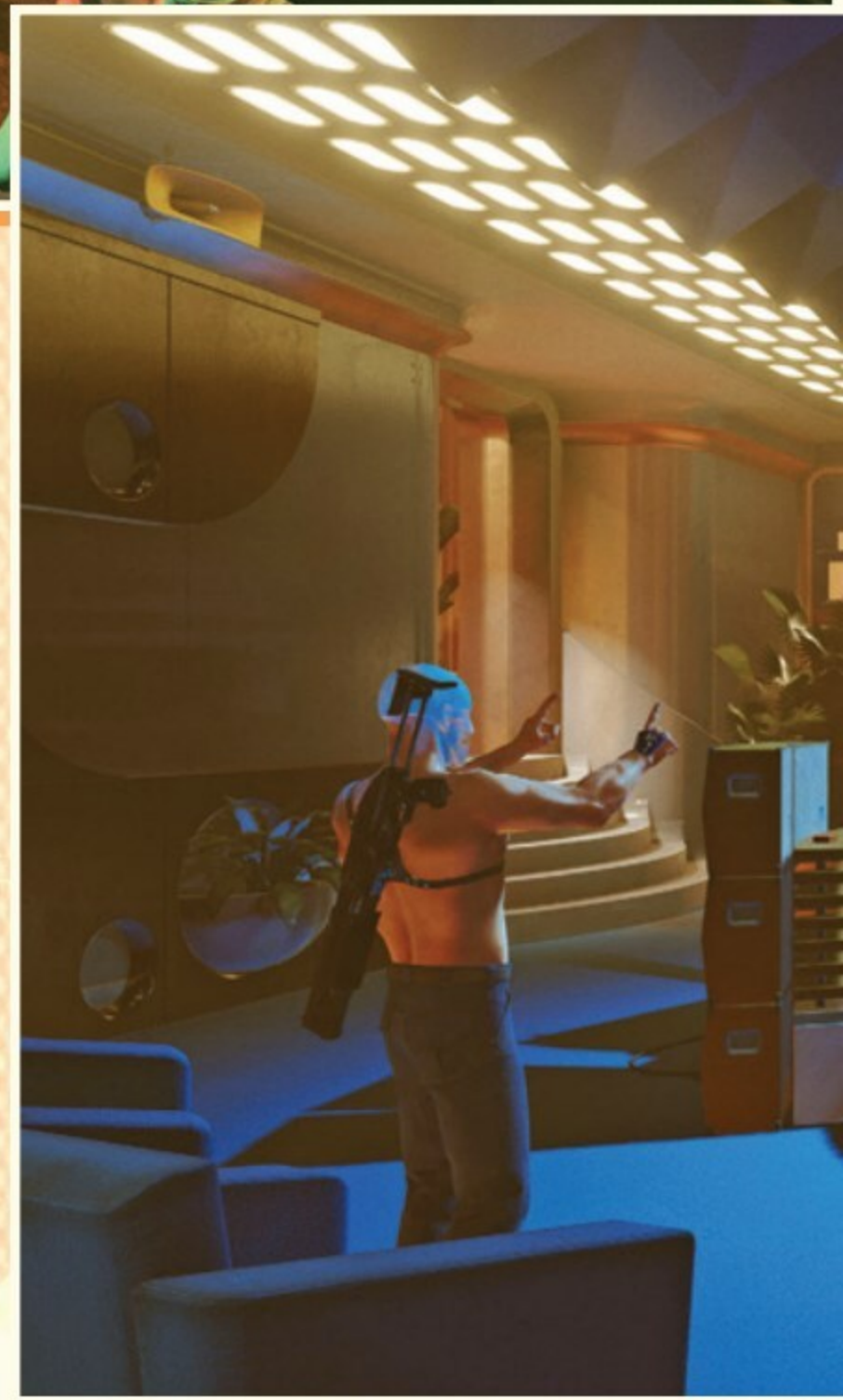
"We started as a tiny studio, just eight of us," says Mitton, who is now Arkane's art director. "We were all friends. It wasn't just professional. We really lived in the studio. We worked for hours on projects trying to save the studio, and it's true that every time a project failed, there was this emotional side of 'No! No! It's not possible. This project needs to happen. It's so cool and we gave so much of ourselves to it.' But that's okay because every time we would get better."

At Arkane, there is a real sense that good ideas are never wasted, and one project's failure is fuel for the next dream. The perfect example of this is a game called *The Crossing*, which Arkane was developing in the late-2000s before it was canceled. *The Crossing* was planned as a first-person shooter that would fuse a traditional single-player experience with multiplayer mayhem. Arkane's vision was to craft a narrative-driven single-player campaign, but at any point in the story, the usual A.I. opponents could be replaced by other players invading the game. The concept was incredibly novel, especially for the time, but Arkane never found a publisher who was willing to take the idea to the finish line.

With *Deathloop*, Arkane was inspired by its work on *The Crossing* and wanted to attempt something similar. As Colt hunts down the eight visionaries on Blackreef Island, he will also be hunted by another capable assassin named Julianna. This experienced femme fatale is unlike any other character in the game.

REPRISE YOUR ROLE

Dying just before you kill your target can be incredibly frustrating, especially since *Deathloop* doesn't allow players to save whenever they want. Arkane is aware of this potential pain point, which is why the studio has implemented a Reprise system. Whenever Colt dies, a reprise kicks in and rewinds the clock to several seconds before Colt's death, giving players a chance to retake that sequence and avoid resetting the loop. Colt starts each day with two reprises, but he can replenish his stock by hunting down and killing Julianna each day.



Like Colt, Julianna also knows she is in a time loop. And unlike the rest of the grunts populating Blackreef Island, she can be controlled by other players who choose to invade your game and hunt down your version of Colt. Players can turn off this feature and play against a computer-controlled Julianna if they wish, but players who allow other players to invade their game could have some interesting experiences.

"We really have this mode in here for the weird player interactions that could



WHY DEATHLOOP ISN'T A ROGUELIKE

Deathloop has a unique campaign structure. Whenever Colt dies or reaches the end of the day without killing all eight visionaries, the game resets, and players start the day over again. At some point, Colt will learn how to retain some of the weapons and abilities he discovers, so he can access them again at the beginning of each loop. However, early on, Colt will start each day from square one, and only the knowledge he gains during each loop — such as security codes and enemy schedules — will help him progress deeper into the narrative.

On one level, Deathloop sounds a bit like a roguelike, but Arkane doesn't think that comparison is fair. For starters, there is no randomness to the design of Blackreef Island. Every inch of Deathloop's playspace has been designed by hand to entice players to explore its multiple paths.

The entire island is divided into four districts. Likewise, each day has been divided into four different timeframes, and Colt can only explore one area of the island per time of day. The eight visionaries are scattered across these four areas, but some are only accessible at certain times. The levels themselves change throughout the course of the day, so a route that is blocked in the morning or afternoon might open up at night. Fortunately, players can explore each zone as long as they want, but once they leave the level, the clock moves forward to the next time of day.

"At the beginning of the game there are a couple of hours of more-or-less directed play-through," says game director Dinga Bakaba. "It's basically Colt trying to understand why he's on the island and who he is. Then we give the player a couple of mission leads, and players are free to explore those leads as they see fit ... and those leads will open up new leads and new mission objectives on other parts of the island."

The ultimate puzzle in Deathloop is to sort out the perfect path through the day and determine which areas to visit at which time in order to assassinate all eight targets. To accomplish that, Colt might have to engineer scenarios that encourage some targets to travel to other parts of the island, and he might have to set up deathtraps for targets that can wipe out his marks during times that his attention is needed elsewhere. Arkane says that there is only one ultimate solution for how to assassinate all eight Visionaries in a single day, but each player's path to that solution could look wildly different.



happen," Bakaba says. "Julianna's not directly incentivized by the systems to win over Colt, so there is definitely a way to play Julianna that is not about winning, but is more about role-playing. Why not roleplay and get into someone's campaign and stalk them, then appear and give them a jump scare ... Or you could be an almost friendly Julianna. You could imagine that players could also help each other, so suddenly it becomes a weird emergent co-op experience."

However players roleplay Julianna is

up to them, but they will have to play through a bit of Colt's campaign before they unlock her mode. Arkane says Julianna doesn't have a traditional narrative campaign, but she will have a progression system, and playing as her unlocks various cosmetics that can be applied to both Julianna and Colt. "It's a very free multiplayer experience," Bakaba says. "We really want this mode to be fun and more of a water cooler and anecdote generator than a hardcore competitive mode."



INFINITE LIVES

Over the last four years, Arkane has painstakingly created a brand-new world. But that's something the studio is eminently good at. With Dishonored, Arkane built a grim urban fantasy full of political intrigue and supernatural artifacts. The team has taken those sensibilities and its passion for systemic game design and crafted a vibrant new universe that combines '60s retro-futurism with superhuman combat. However, Arkane didn't create this new world without a lot of hard work. To shape Deathloop, Arkane has had to focus on a lot of small details – even as tiny as the buttons on a character's shirt.

"The characters are the starting point," Mitton says. "My grandparents and my great uncle, who's almost 100, used to be tailors. From a very young age, I could hear the scissors, and I could see all the clothes being cut and stitched together ... I have this passion for clothing because the characters of this world create this world. I try to think about, 'If I lived here, how would I interact with the world? The whole team really thinks like that.'"

Arkane put a lot of thought into every inch of Blackreef Island and all the characters who inhabit it. During their research, Arkane's writers studied the theory behind time loops and created a detailed fictional history for Blackreef. A few designers on the team have degrees in architecture, which has allowed the studio to create buildings that are both believable and exciting to explore. Arkane's artists even researched how paint flecks on worn metal while inventing an entire line of fictional military equipment.

"It's important not to discover a generic universe because we live through generic things every day," Mitton says. "We want to have people dream and travel. That's my main line as a creator. When we drop players into a new place, we want them to be in travel mode. And if what they see looks like what we know in our daily life,

then why travel? Why didn't we just stay home? We absolutely want to ensure that everything we discover is not common. It's a fight to steer away from what's generic."

Even as Arkane is locked in a creative battle to put the finishing touches on its game, its main character remains locked in a battle of his own. Near the end of our time with Arkane, we return to our demo one last time. It's still morning on Blackreef Island, and Colt has just emerged from the underground tunnels that wind their way across this desolate landmass. A hangover from the night before is just beginning to ease, but Colt's real troubles have only just begun. ♦

For more on Deathloop, including exclusive interviews with Arkane, character bios, and a video breakdown of the different approaches through a level, head over to gameinformer.com/deathloop





Julianna is Colt's worst nightmare. Throughout the day, she hunts Colt for sport. Julianna can be computer-controlled, or you can allow other players to invade your game as Julianna





How Axiom Verge 2 is bringing worlds together

*How Axiom Verge 2
is bringing worlds together*



» PLATFORM
Switch • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action

» PUBLISHER
Thomas Happ Games

» DEVELOPER
Thomas Happ Games

» RELEASE
Spring

BY JOE JUBA



If you like Metroid, you're in luck. Over the years, countless games have taken inspiration from Nintendo's classic series, giving gamers an abundance of ways to explore connected maps, earn upgrades, and unearth secret items. But of all the projects that contain traces of Metroid DNA, 2015's *Axiom Verge* came the closest to reconstructing it. The original *Axiom Verge* had a retro aesthetic, a lonely atmosphere, and an array of clever abilities that made the mysterious world a joy to traverse.

However *Axiom Verge* wasn't a mere imitator; it built on a solid foundation with its own signature elements. A heady sci-fi story and mind-bending meta elements put a contemporary twist on the familiar formula – and with *Axiom Verge 2*, players are about to learn even more about this series' unique identity. After five years of work by solo developer Tom Happ, this prequel/sequel hybrid is almost done, and I played the first few hours of an alpha version to see how the *Axiom Verge* universe is evolving.



A COLD OPEN

"Come to Antarctica if you wish to see your daughter again." That's the message Indra Chaudhari sees when she turns on a prototype ansible – a device capable of faster-than-light communication. Indra is the founder and CEO of a conglomerate called Globe, and her organization recently inherited a defunct research station on the icy continent. So Indra heads south to explore the meaning of the mysterious message.

This backstory is explained during a brief scroll before I even choose "start game." Though the story and characters are important to *Axiom Verge 2*, it isn't a game that relies on cutscenes and lengthy exposition. Instead, I am put in control of Indra as soon as her helicopter lands, then set loose to start exploring Antarctica. The snow-covered ground, blue sky, and blowing flurries are a shift from the dark and alien corridors of the original *Axiom Verge* ... but the journey doesn't stay tethered to our world for long.

After navigating the abandoned research station, Indra finds a secret room with what appears to be a normal freight elevator. But somewhere during that elevator ride, Indra crosses over into a different reality. Like protagonist Trace from the previous entry, she becomes a stranger in a strange land. But Indra's land is strange in many new ways; the inhabitants are more intelligent, and the world is more seamlessly connected. Even Indra herself isn't the same; after dying in this unfamiliar place, she is resurrected by a deific digital entity who was apparently confined to a nearby urn. This allows Indra to survive and continue her quest – and all this happens before you fight a single enemy.

"One thing that's different is where in *Axiom Verge 1* you only ever see Trace's life on Earth in cutscenes, in *Axiom Verge 2* it takes you on the character's journey from Earth into this other world, and then her subsequent transformation that leads into her gaining all these powers," says developer Tom Happ. "So there isn't any combat until then. It's a bit like the intro to *Link to the Past* before you get the sword, or *Super Metroid* before you encounter Ridley. At the start I made it too long – there was a big robot blowing stuff up and you had no way to fight it – this only served to slow it down and also reduced the feeling of mystery."

While this introductory sequence may still change between now and release, its current state successfully builds tension while introducing the basic premise and mechanics. Once Indra is rebuilt after her first death, though, the real adventure begins.



CLOSE COMBAT

If you're familiar with games in the Metroidvania subgenre, you have a basic idea how the action progresses: You see an area you want to reach, but you can't get there because of some obstacle, like a barrier you can't break or a ledge you can't reach. Then you get a new item or ability, and that allows you to explore previously inaccessible areas, where the cycle eventually begins again.

One of my favorite parts of the original Axiom Verge was how the barriers to progression didn't just feel like "find the keycard for a locked door" scenarios. The items and abilities you acquired often affected your overall mobility and contributed to a sense of growing power. For example, when Trace gained the ability to phase through walls, it wasn't just used once to reach one area; it opened up an array of new places across the map.

Axiom Verge 2 adheres to this satisfying model and adds its own surprises. Indra learns to grab ledges, climb walls, hack enemies, remotely control a drone, and more. I'm not going to run through every blockade and how I pushed through it during the three hours I played – especially since the sense of discovery is a big part of the fun. However, I am going to talk about the first weapon you find, because it represents an interesting new direction for Axiom Verge 2.

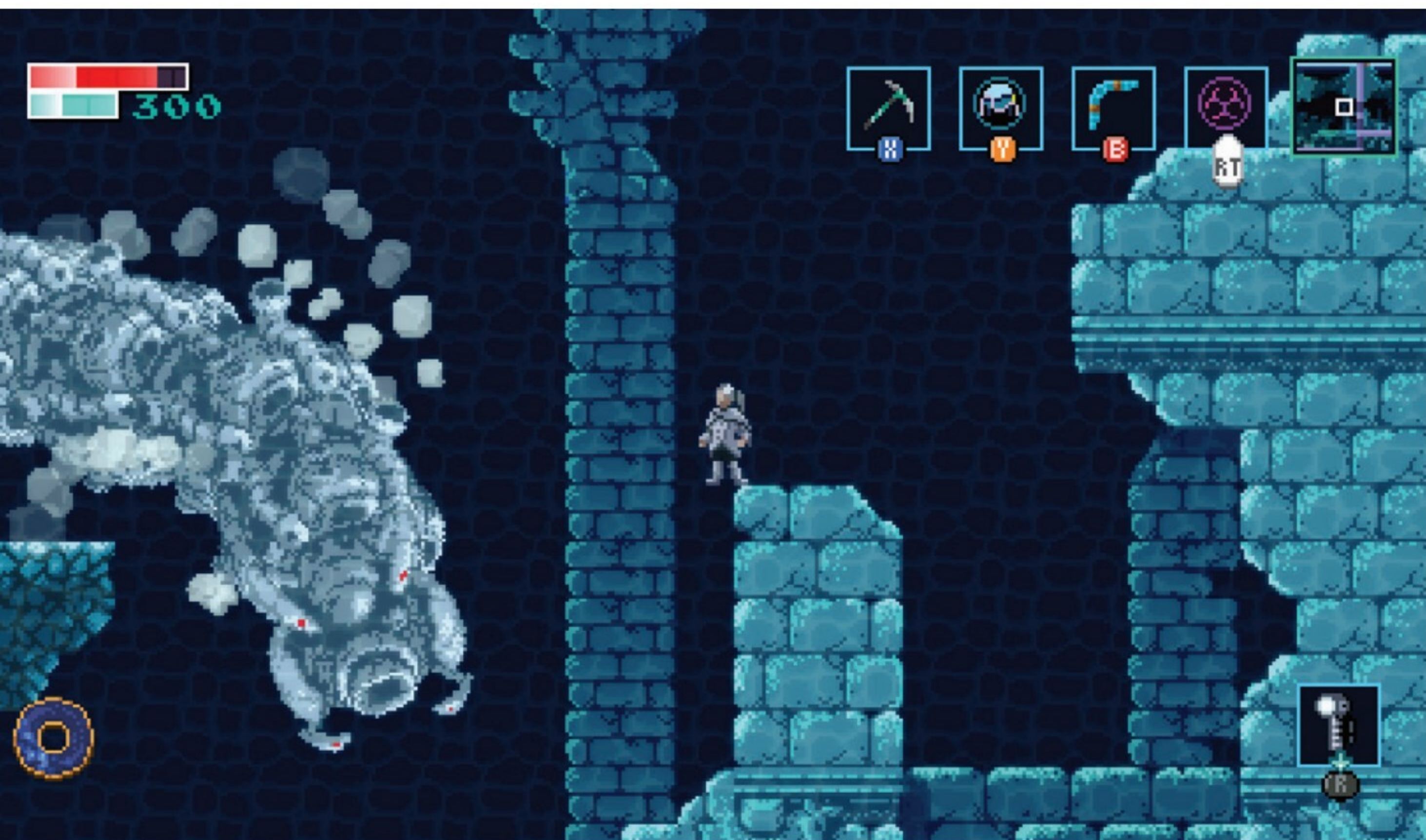
A short distance from the helipad – before she even crosses into the new world – Indra grabs an ice axe. She can swing this weapon to attack enemies and destroy objects such as wooden crates. It may seem like a basic tool, but the fact that the ice axe is a melee weapon has a major impact on combat, especially compared to the previous game.

In the original Axiom Verge, Trace's initial weapon was a gun (the first of 25 players could acquire), which established his primary method of dealing with problems: He shot them. Similarly, Indra's ice axe sets the tone for her approach. She does most of her damage at close range, which felt strange to me at first. Jumping into melee range to fight against lethal robots is more intense than firing safely at them from afar; I kept expecting to find a traditional gun that let me chip away at enemies from a distance, but the closest thing I got in the opening hours was a boomerang. That ranged weapon is useful, but a bit too slow and weak to fully substitute for something like Trace's Axiom Disruptor.

Though the ice axe isn't Indra's only offensive option, it certainly is her primary one early on. Even though you find other items, don't expect to manage a sprawling arsenal, because Happ is implementing a smaller and more focused toolset for Axiom Verge 2. When asked about what drove that decision, he says: "One of the biggest criticisms of AV1 was that there were too many guns, so that definitely played a part. The other is that going with melee attacks, and the fidelity I wanted (you can attack in eight directions while standing, jumping, and crouching), there are a ton of animations that I had to pixel by hand."

The other component that makes the melee combat more layered is the heightened intelligence of the foes you face. The hostile drones of Axiom Verge 2 aren't confined to static and easily predictable routes, and many of them are able to detect and pursue Indra with surprising efficiency. They react to your presence in different ways; some charge you, some create distance, and some blast you with lasers. Learning these behaviors and adapting to them – especially when facing an encounter with a diverse assortment of enemies – makes combat feel dynamic and dangerous. But for Indra to succeed in her mission, you need more than an axe and a boomerang.





TOYS WITH A TWIST

Even with battles punctuating almost every step of the journey, the ways Indra moves through the world feel more important than the ways she fights its denizens. Axiom Verge 2 gives players a variety of ways to influence and explore their surroundings, leading to secret items, hidden shortcuts, and an overall sense of progression. Some of these may seem familiar if you played the original Axiom Verge, but a closer look reveals significant tweaks with major effects.

Take the hacking ability, for example. On the surface, it's a twist on "glitching" from the first game; it allows Indra to alter the environment or change an enemy behavior, much like the results of Trace's glitch gun. But the important difference here is the player's level of control. Unlike the predetermined effects of the glitch gun, when Indra hacks an enemy, she is able to choose from a list of available outcomes that vary depending on the target. I flipped the allegiance of one steam-spewing foe so it attacked other enemies in the area instead of me. I slowed down a bipedal assault robot so I could more easily dodge its blasts. I made a component of an airborne sentry emit health. Each of these actions draws from a total

pool of points (like mana) that prevents you from firing these powers off constantly, but hacking is an invaluable tool for creating openings in tricky situations.

Another familiar-looking ability is Indra's drone, a small and remote-controlled proxy that you can deploy to check out areas Indra can't reach herself. You can activate the drone at any time – even toss it out mid-air – for combat and recon. The drone can squeeze through narrow passages, and I also found a grappling hook upgrade that lets it slingshot up to ledges that are too high for Indra. It also has access to hacking, which makes it perfect for opening up certain blocked paths. In one area, I found a closed gate with a command console on the other side, but the console was beyond the range of Indra's hacking nano-swarm. So I deployed the drone and took a detour through a few screens (fighting enemies with the drone's buzzsaw and jumping from one ledge to the next) until I reached the other side of the gate. Once there, the drone deployed the nano-swarm and opened the gate, permanently opening the path for Indra. The drone also plays into another new and unique facet of exploration, but that was the one thing about my time with Axiom Verge 2 I'm not allowed to talk about yet.

Actions like hacking and using the drone evolve as you play; you don't see everything they can do when you first acquire them. In some cases, that means finding dedicated upgrades, like the drone's grappling hook. But players can also guide their progression manually thanks to a skill system. You find special blue urns in hard-to-reach places, and each one acts as a skill point that you can distribute at will among Indra's various capabilities. Some of the upgrades are straightforward, like increasing health or melee damage. Others are more utility-focused, like increasing your hacking level so you can affect more complex devices and open higher-level gates. I didn't get to sense the full effect of this system in my limited time playing, but my initial impression is that it adds a fun and fluid layer of player-guided progression that complements the more linear process of obtaining new items to reach the next zone.

DO YOU NEED TO PLAY THE ORIGINAL?

Since developer Tom Happ describes Axiom Verge 2 as both a prequel and a sequel, players unfamiliar with the series might be confused about whether or not this entry is the right place to jump in. "It leans more to prequel than sequel, but timeline-wise, it happens after some of the events shown in AV1," Happ says. However, he also acknowledges that "various sci-fi features" introduced in Axiom Verge 2 complicate the matter. Here's the bottom line: You can play Axiom Verge 2 before or after the first game and still appreciate each entry on its own terms.

THE NEW WORLD

One of the fundamental joys of Metroid-inspired games is finally being able to reach a part of the map that was previously closed off to you. Satisfying your inner cartographer and surveying every corner of the world is a strange thrill, and that thrill is enhanced in Axiom Verge 2 thanks to the way the environment is constructed and presented.

The first things you'll notice are the visuals and music. Just because the graphics have a retro aesthetic doesn't mean they can't look great; smooth animations, varied surroundings, and cool enemy design mean that you almost always have something neat to look at. And behind all of that is the striking soundtrack (which Happ composed himself), hitting strange and foreboding sci-fi notes that feel appropriate for the otherworldly setting.

One big upgrade over the original Axiom Verge is how the areas of the map flow into each other. For one thing, the environment is no longer tile-based, so the world simply looks more natural and believable. But even more importantly, the zones aren't all separated by doors that funnel you from one room to another. While you still experience screen-to-screen transitions, the areas are less confined and more continuous. It may seem like a minor detail to many players, but in fact, this change presented one of the biggest development challenges for Axiom Verge 2.

"Since the world is largely not connected by pipe doors anymore, it means that if you were to transition vertically between rooms, it'd be jarring, because it's scrolling the screen over to the new room mid-jump." Happ says. "I didn't realize this until I'd already designed the whole map layout and I had to change everything to make sure it doesn't happen. It was a big puzzle for me to solve."

This approach gives Indra's surroundings an open and connected feeling in the zones I explored. Though she still finds herself in tight corridors, the general sense of Axiom Verge 2's world is one of a single, large space that contains several biomes – snowy peaks, watery ruins, grassy plains – rather than being separated into discrete, self-contained areas. But that doesn't mean that everything is just obvious and out in the open; I still encountered plenty of breakable walls, hidden passages, and other secrets to encourage thorough exploration.

A BIGGER UNIVERSE

As a fan of the original Axiom Verge (and Metroidvania games in general), my introduction to Axiom Verge 2 left me excited and intrigued. It seems to be taking the right steps for a follow-up; it builds on success without repeating itself too much, and it takes surprising turns that add depth to

OTHER INSPIRATIONS

Though "Metroidvania" is often used as a catch-all term, the original Axiom Verge was definitely rooted more in the "Metroid" side of the formula. That is less true of Axiom Verge 2; developer Tom Happ says that players will recognize elements of Castlevania in the follow-up, as well as some inspiration from other sources. "You'll see some more Zelda and Castlevania influences in Axiom Verge 2," Happ says. "I was also very taken with 2017's Prey and Horizon Zero Dawn, though maybe not in the ways you'd expect."

the series' lore. How is Indra's journey connected to Trace's? What's up with all these alternate worlds? What are the goals of the god-like entities in each reality? While Axiom Verge 2 definitely invites players to ponder these questions, it doesn't spend the opening hours belaboring its points or bombarding players with overwrought explanations.

"In a lot of ways, the more mysteries you reveal, the less interesting it becomes," Happ says. "But then on the other hand, if you don't plan ahead for what the answers are, you can have a story that meanders and contradicts itself and makes no sense in the end. So I think there is a balance of making sure there is always something you don't fully reveal, but give players enough info that they could guess the answer without being fully certain."

It's also likely that players won't have the answers to every question by the end of Axiom Verge 2. The story was initially conceived as spanning multiple installments, and though we aren't guaranteed future entries, it still leaves players with a compelling mystery and the sense that the universe is much bigger than the slivers we have seen.

"When developing AV1's story I made this big outline of the salient plot points that included overviews for six to eight other games, with the events of AV1 being towards the end and the events of AV2 being towards the beginning," Happ says. "I did it this way because I liked the idea of how your perception of a story changes as the context changes."

While the destiny of Axiom Verge as a whole remains fuzzy, its immediate future gives fans plenty to look forward to. Axiom Verge 2 will be released on Switch and Epic Games Store sometime before the end of June (with the exact release date still TBA), with a likely move to other platforms in the future. In my time playing, I was impressed by its attempts to merge its old-school sensibilities with modern innovation – and I'm sure I've only scratched the surface of what Axiom Verge 2 has to offer. ♦



Resident Evil Village

A new perspective on a familiar sight

» **Platform**

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**

1-Player Survival Horror

» **Publisher**

Capcom

» **Developer**

Capcom

» **Release**

May 7

When Capcom switches camera perspectives in a new Resident Evil game, you know the developer means business. In 2005, Resident Evil 4's camera was placed behind Leon Kennedy's back (as opposed to fixed camera angles), revolutionizing the third-person shooter. In 2017, when Resident Evil 7: Biohazard went first-person (a series first if you don't consider 2003's Resident Evil: Dead Aim), it marked a new era for the long-running franchise.

Both examples were born from periods of series fatigue, and while you can argue RE4's perspective shift took the franchise away from its horror roots, the latest mainline Resident Evil game, Resident Evil Village, is a chance for Capcom to prove its decision to double down on scares was the right one. That going first person, bringing back the horror, and leaving large-scale action behind wasn't just a fluke. So far, based on limited glimpses in a recent

gameplay trailer and demo, Village looks like it could be the next great Resident Evil title.

Like Biohazard, Village stars Ethan Winters, a relative newcomer to the series. After the events of the previous game, Winters and his wife Mia have been living a peaceful life together with their baby daughter. However, this being a video game, things go violently wrong. Series staple Chris Redfield shows up, attacks the family, kidnaps the Winters' child, and Ethan sets to find out why. His journey takes him to a remote village nestled underneath the gigantic Castle Dimitrescu, where he faces werewolves, very tall vampires, and a whole host of monstrosities.

If a remote village nestled beneath a castle sounds familiar, Resident Evil 4 had a similar setting. With a RE4 remake heavily rumored to be in the pipeline, it's hard to say how much Village will lean into this territory, but at the very least, a gameplay trailer

revealed back in January showed Ethan exploring and fighting around the castle, displaying its ornate and meticulously detailed interior.

Capcom's recent trailer was the third time we've seen Village, but this time we finally have a better idea about the moment-to-moment gameplay. Crafting and inventory management is back in a big way (coincidentally enough, referencing RE4's attache systems), and the team really highlighted that, like a lot of Resident Evil games, there will be breakable boxes in the environment filled with resources. The merchant, or "The Duke," also makes a return; time he is a gigantic, rotund man who seems to lean on outdated views of overweight people as gross, clumsy, and worthy of humor. It might be too late for Capcom to completely overhaul the design of the character, and it's unfortunate to see the developer lean into clichés about people who are overweight.



One of the more interesting things shown off in the recent trailer is combat. While *Village* isn't anywhere close to the bombast of games like *Resident Evil 5* and *6*, it does look to rely more on gunplay and enemy variety than *Biohazard*. One moment features Ethan fighting off a group of werewolves backed up by a giant wielding an appropriately large hammer. The beasts are quick and the abomination tagging along with them is fiercely powerful. Another scene, ostensibly set in a sewer or dungeon system, features creepy ghouls dressed in religious garb that Ethan dispatches with a shotgun, all the while using the game's block mechanic against attacks. According to game producer Peter Fabiano, with *Village*, the team is trying to add variety to its foes – a welcome change of pace over *Biohazard*.

"Each enemy has their own distinct way of fighting," Fabiano said in the game's trailer, which he also narrated.

"So you will need to change up your strategy to defeat them."

Like the "Kitchen Demo" that preceded *Biohazard*, Capcom also released a small demo for *Village*, called "The Maiden." A few things to note upfront is that *The Maiden* demo isn't from *Village* proper; you won't be replaying through this when you play the actual game. Also, there's no combat here. In fact, you only encounter one foe during the short demo and your only option is to evade them. Lastly, the demo is only available on PlayStation 5.

However, *The Maiden* is worth playing. At the very least, it gives you a chance to see what the RE Engine (also used on *Biohazard*, *Resident Evil 2* and *3 Remake*, and *Devil May Cry 5*) is capable of on the PlayStation 5. More than that, it sets the tone for what to expect when you get your hands on the full game. In my time playing the demo, I found it to be adequately scary

for what it is (about 10 or 15 minutes in length, with limited things to do) and gives you a brief introduction to the family of vampires and witches haunting Castle Dimitrescu. If you spend any amount of time on Twitter, I'm sure you're already familiar with these ladies. If not, Lady Alina Dimitrescu is the owner of the castle, a mutant woman, who according to Capcom, stands at 9 feet 6 inches. Deduction leads us to believe that at some point in *Village* we will fight Lady Dimitrescu, though in *The Maiden* she gets the best of you. The bigger they are, the harder they fall. Until next time, Lady.

There's still a lot we don't know about *Village* – its main plot, why everyone's so big in this creepy village, and what is Lady Dimitrescu's endgame. From what we've seen so far, we're intrigued to see where Capcom takes us next. Wherever it may be, chances are it's going to end poorly for someone.

» **Blake Hester**

The Elder Scrolls Online: Gates Of Oblivion

A gateway into a new future



» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Stadia • PC

» **Style**
MMORPG

» **Publisher**
Bethesda Softworks

» **Developer**
ZeniMax Online Studios

» **Release**
June 1 (Stadia, PC)
June 8 (PS4, Xbox One)

The Elder Scrolls Online has been in a constant state of evolution since it was released in 2014, with each expansion breathing new life into Tamriel and further connecting the MMORPG to its single-player counterparts. We've become a warden with Morrowind, unlocked unlimited power as necromancers in Elsweyr, danced with elite High Elves in Summerset, and tangled with vampires in Greymoor. Now, it's time to dive into a tale set 800 years before the events of The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion with the origin story of an infamous Daedric prince: Mehrunes Dagon.

ZeniMax Online Studios gave us our first look at the Gates of Oblivion adventure, exploring a new tale that begins with the Flames of Ambition DLC and continues on with the Blackwood chapter. This saga will continue throughout the year with new chapters to further unravel the mystery surrounding the Daedric prince – including never-before-explored areas of Tamriel alongside fresh takes on some familiar places.

Blackwood will be a new zone to explore with a fiendish storyline that connects to the larger Gates of Oblivion picture. This new chapter also introduces the highly requested companion system, which is the first step to adding romance into the online game. In the single-player Elder Scrolls games, players have several characters they can build relationships with. Some of those relationships can even lead to in-game marriage. In ESO, however, the lack of companion characters provided no meaningful way to get attached to the many faces we met throughout our adventures. Now that companions are making their way into the online world to help make ESO even more single-player friendly, we sat down with creative director Rich Lambert to learn more about how this move sets up many fan-requested features to come.

"With these companions, they have their own likes and dislikes," Lambert says. "You can go up one side and down the other side with your relationship to them. There is going to be

something special that unlocks when you max out that relationship spectrum as well, though initially, romance won't be a part of it. Down the line, though, romance is definitely somewhere we want to get to. We just want to make sure when we add it that we do it right."

For now, there are two companions who players will get to know: Bastian and Mirri. "Bastian is kind of this chivalrous knight kind of personality," Lambert says. He has a complicated history as a son of a noble that players learn about. "He ends up becoming a servant to another noble family and is essentially being the protector of this rich sniveling idiot. The questline that you go through with him to unlock him as a companion covers one of those adventures. And then once you unlock him, you find out a little bit more about who he is and what his personal tragedy is."

Mirri is a mischievous Dunmer thief who Lambert describes as having a "stab you in the back" kind of personality. Lambert mentions that she has an



interesting twist in her storyline, but he wasn't willing to tell me more no matter how much I was intrigued to hear.

Players can spec companions out to suit their playstyle, and solo players can take them into instances that usually require additional players, such as dungeons.

"Companions are there if you choose to use them – your permanent adventuring buddies. You unlock them by doing quests in the Blackwood chapter," Lambert says. "Once you have them, you can level them up, you can equip gear on them, you can assign them to a specific role; so if you need a tank, you can have them go tanky, or healer or damage dealer. You can set their skills that they use and the order they use them in. Each companion also has its own series of likes and dislikes. There's a report system associated with this. This system will change as players progress through the story to unlock new quests to get to know each companion."

Just like previous expansions, there will be new public events, new quests, and more. Blackwood's main story puts players in danger once again to uncover a conspiracy involving the exiled Longhouse Emperors and an uncovered pact made with magic meant to doom life as we know it. The upcoming DLC is a dark deep dive into the history of The Elder Scrolls. It also answers long-asked questions such as how Mehrunes Dagon became so powerful. What drove the Daedric prince to pursue the creation of the gates to Oblivion? Why was he such a weenie in the beginning?

Lambert also tells us that the fourth

quarter of this DLC takes place entirely in the Deadlands; a locale that will be an entirely new experience for fans of the online game.

The next step of ESO will be the fifth major story expansion for the MMORPG alongside numerous smaller DLC. When the online game was first released, it was met with negative backlash due to its high monthly subscription price and its seemingly boring narrative. Though the story did eventually pick up in the base game, it was very slow to start, especially in those first 20 levels. However, with each expansion, the experience grew

to become something powerfully majestic. That, paired with the removal of the mandatory online subscription service, and the ESO community has evolved into a passionate community of skooma-peddlers.

Oblivion is a personal favorite, so to see the not-so-humble beginnings of Mehrunes is enticing. Plus, the Deadlands? Who wouldn't want to feel like a total beast in combat in an area like that? Where the tale goes next, we don't know, but Lambert did tell us that they are "nowhere near" done with DLC, full expansions, and surprises for fans. » **Liana Ruppert**



Returnal

Action expertise, narrative intrigue

» **Platform**
PS5

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Interactive
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Housemarque

» **Release**
April 30



Housemarque has been steadily pumping out some of the tightest action and shooting projects in the gaming landscape over its 25-plus-year history, but not everyone has been privy to that prowess, since many of the team's games have been "smaller" arcade-style experiences. The studio's latest effort ups the ante, combining the taut and fast-moving bullet-hell combat we've previously seen from this team with a high-concept sci-fi story. I've been eager for the project's release on developer reputation alone, but after seeing an extended demo of the game in action, Returnal has rocketed ahead to be one of my most anticipated releases on the horizon.

"During the last two console generations, we focused on these arcade-inspired experiences," says game director Harry Krueger. "And in many ways, it feels like Returnal is a natural continuation of that philosophy. A lot of trademark qualities such as really tight controls, explosive action, depth without complexity, and that compulsion to play just one more go – we're still bringing those qualities to Returnal." Those dynamics are undoubtedly on display in the portion of the game I witnessed, but the addition of a third-person camera, detailed 3D environments, and the horsepower of the PlayStation 5 fueling weapon effects and animation, all combine to put Returnal into a different tier of ambition and complexity.

Players take on the role of Selene, a space explorer who crash-lands her ship on a forbidding planet while attempting to respond to a mysterious signal. The hows and whys of her deep space adventure are a subject of mystery within the game, as you awaken at the start as her ship is crashing. She sets out to explore the planet of Atropos, only to find it incredibly hostile. Her inevitable death at the hands of the monstrous creatures she finds would spell the end, except that in that moment, she startles to life once again aboard her crashing ship, with no choice but to continue her explorations.

"Returnal is designed around

replayability," Krueger explains. "The roguelike aspect allows us to create consistently fresh experiences and make sure every time the players pick up the game, there will be something new and exciting waiting for them." Housemarque has developed hand-crafted rooms and spaces to uncover, but the planet is constantly reconfiguring itself, creating a procedurally generated landscape that is never the same for subsequent runs. "The planet is an ever-changing entity, and Selene is trapped in a time loop," Krueger says. "Every time she reawakens, the planet is slightly different. She's like a rat trapped in an ever-changing maze."

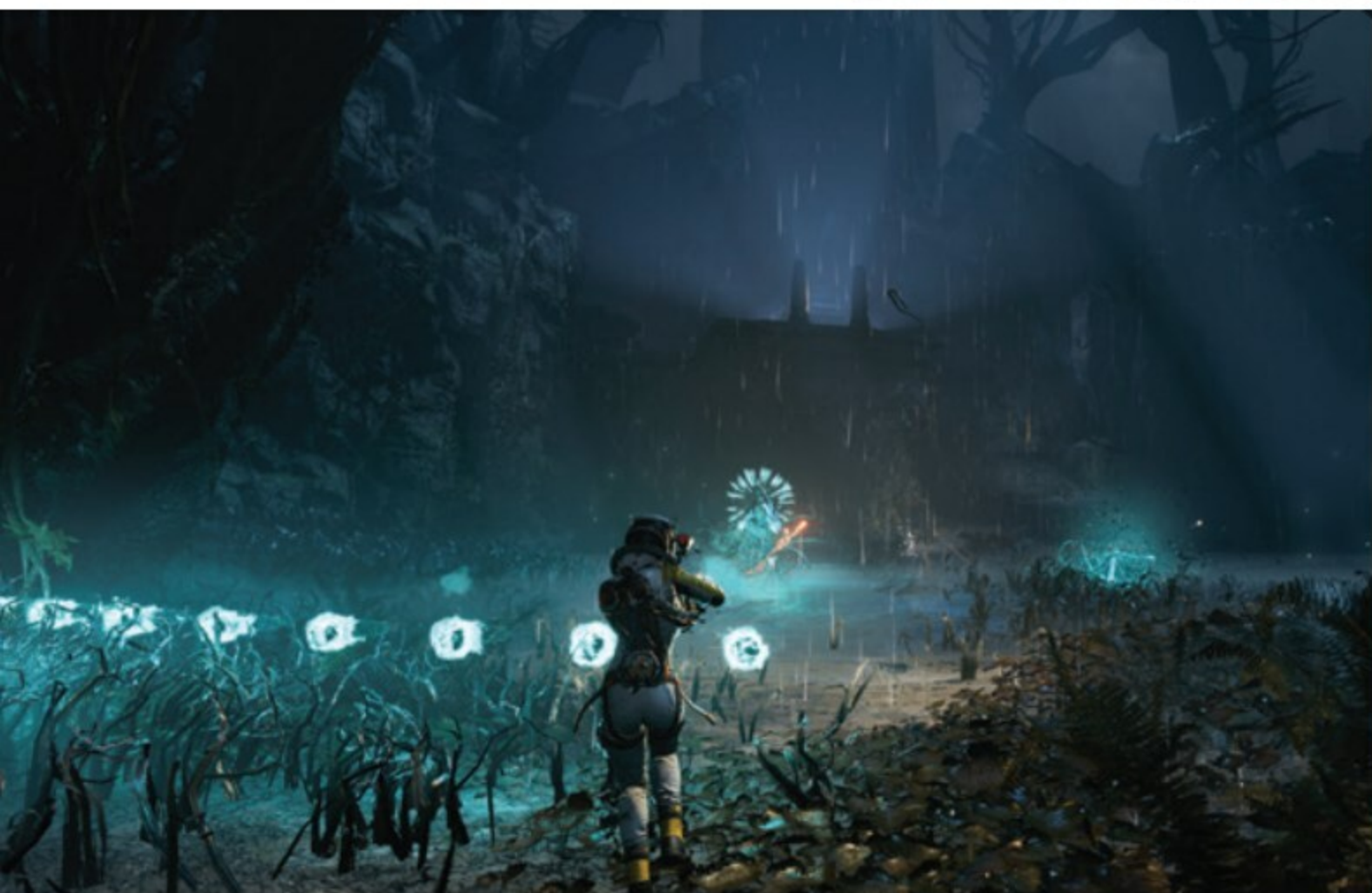
As the game continues, Selene gains access to an array of permanent upgrades – like a melee attack, a hook shot, or even geographical changes to the world, like a bridge or door that opens up for all subsequent runs – but other improvements drop away after each run. Upgrades in a given cycle through the loop might improve health or attack power. Alien parasites graft themselves to her, offering both positive and negative modifiers. Ten different weapon archetypes appear, but each time with dramatic variations from their baseline behaviors, with stackable traits like piercing or explosive rounds that alter their potential. And those new weapons also come with random and alien alt-fire options, like a lightning blast or the ability to shoot out tentacles that ensnare enemies.



The biomes of Atropos house numerous horrific alien monstrosities, and combat is a mix of smart weapon deployment, along with a mix of jumping and dashing in various directions to avoid an onslaught of particle-heavy enemy blasts and lunges. At times, the action recedes for a moment to present traversal challenges, or the chance to uncover hidden paths and rooms that contain new improvements – or sometimes just more deadly encounters.

Beyond the action, Housemarque is also tapping into a haunting and isolating atmosphere in which Selene is questioning her own reality. At one point, she begins to encounter the dead versions of herself – sometimes from previous runs you’ve completed, and sometimes from future runs she hasn’t yet attempted. And from time to time, ensconced in the geography of this completely alien planet, she comes across a perfectly normal Earth house from her own past. The camera shifts to a first-person perspective, and players guide Selene into the house, where some deep-seated trauma holds her back from opening certain doors and facing what lies within. “Selene has been here for so long that she can’t even trust her own memories anymore,” Krueger says. “She’s lived through this repetition so much that the planet seems to know her better than she knows herself.”

Returnal looks spectacular running on Sony’s new PlayStation 5 hardware, and I’m told that Housemarque is leveraging the potential of the exclusive properties of the console, from a robust use of the 3D audio engine, to aggressive implementation of the adaptive trigger potential, allowing the L2 aim button to shift from a focused-sight to an alt-fire mode, depending on the strength of the finger pull. While the hands-off demo looks thrilling, I’ve yet to play for myself. If the action ends up feeling as good as it looks, Housemarque may have something very special on its hands. » **Matt Miller**



Biomutant

The post-apocalyptic fable's time is coming

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
THQ Nordic

» **Developer**
Experiment 101

» **Release**
May 25

Experiment 101's debut game *Biomutant* has impressed us each time we've seen it in action, for several key reasons. It's hard not to be enthusiastic about its interesting blend of martial-arts-inspired combat and gunplay, where players can customize styles and weapons at will. And then there's the fascinating setting, in which anthropomorphized critters, including your raccoon hero, rule a post-apocalyptic world. And then there are mutations, and a morality system that affects the story, and – look we can go on. The point is, we've been looking forward to playing it for several years. Now, finally, we have a release date for when that's going to be possible.

After years of sticking to "it'll be out when it's ready," Experiment 101 and THQ Nordic have revealed that the so-called post-apocalyptic kung-fu fable will be arriving on May 25. What looks like a long development process from the outside comes in many ways from the simple fact that Experiment 101 is a small team of about 20 developers. They're making an ambitious adventure set in a hand-crafted open world of about 25 square miles and, that doesn't come quickly or easily.

"To be in a situation where you have time, where your partner says, 'Okay guys, we understand it. You're a few people, it's a big game. We'll give you the time.' I've never been in that situation," says studio head Stefan Ljungqvist. "I think that was the biggest thing for me, to have the support of THQ Nordic to say, 'Let's just wait it out until we feel comfortable with setting that release date.'"

Much has happened since *Biomutant* was first announced in August 2017, and those events have affected development to various degrees. The global pandemic is front-of-mind for many of us, and working remotely has provided its own set of challenges for the team. And surely, the release of

new-gen consoles had to have factored into development, right? While the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S aren't being ignored within Experiment 101, Ljungqvist also says they're not a major consideration at the moment. In other words, the game's development hasn't been slowed down to accommodate the new tech.

"We were leading from the other way around; rather than doing a current-gen version for *Biomutant*, we always developed from last gen and up, which makes it a lot easier to scale up," Ljungqvist says. "The game, as it is, from the beginning, existed in a high-end version for PC. The tricky thing I think as a developer is that if you start from the other way around – I cannot say what CD Projekt Red did, but I assume that they started from the high-end version and tried to scale it down. And you'll always be in a tough spot there. It's going to be difficult."

Ljungqvist also says that the limited availability of newer hardware has been a factor as well. "For me as a developer, and this is my personal point of view, if you pour your heart and soul into something for so many years, you want as many people as possible to be able to experience it." While new hardware has been grabbing headlines, it's really not the team's focus at this point. For the last stretch, the team has been putting their efforts toward ensuring that the game runs well on hardware that most players have access to, and that it runs with a minimal number of bugs. "And once we have done that, I think the other things will fall into place automatically," he says. "Right now, the priority is not, 'Oh, look at our ray tracing,' or whatnot; the priority is to get the main experience as solid as possible."

Biomutant's behind-the-scenes activity is interesting on its own – even without dwelling on Ljungqvist's recent back surgery, which laid him up for

several months. As the game's art and creative director, you can imagine how that affected the production of a game that was actively being developed. Let's not forget that there's a game at the center of all of this. What's been happening with *Biomutant* since we last saw it in 2019?

"One of the things that we realized at the end of last year was that we tried to make the game as open as possible," Ljungqvist says. "Obviously, we wanted you to explore as much and find as many of those weird things that we put in there, because there is quite a lot of them. From the beginning, we thought that it was a good idea just to allow you to venture out without any major guidance." The team soured on that initial approach once they started thinking about how different types of players might engage with the game and its world. What some might find tantalizing and mysterious, others might find frustrating and vague. "I guess at the start of last year, we were like, 'This is not going to work. We put years of effort and heart and passion into this, the main storyline, everything. And if people get frustrated and they waited so long to play the game, and they just give it up because they couldn't find it, that's just stupid.'"

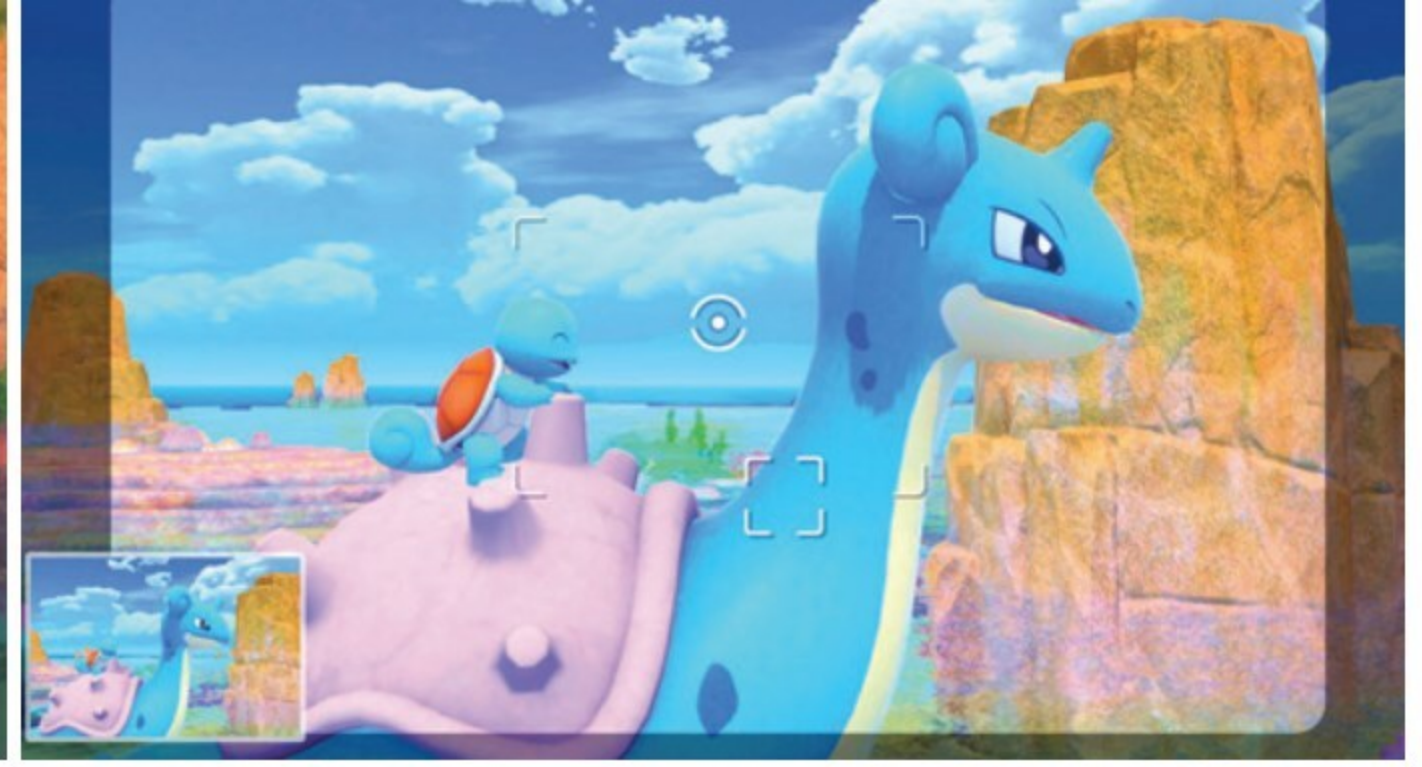
The solution was to restructure the main storyline, giving players a clear path to follow if they want to advance the narrative along. "That doesn't mean that you can't explore the world," Ljungqvist says. "I promise you, you will stumble across things when you're following that, too. That was a bigger restructuring, if you will, of the main game. And that touches everything. It touches missions, quests, it touches the narrative, it touches the world design. I think that was a big shift, but it also made us more aware of how we structure the world, if that makes sense. I think that was a big improvement."

The game's script also expanded from about 85,000 words at the end of 2019 to about 250,000 words. "Basically, what we wanted to do was to give more depth and more flavor to each of these crazy characters that you'll stumble upon, and also the other tribe leaders have more extensive depth in the dialogue and also the narrative wrappers," he says. "I think that helped a lot."

Players will soon be able to see for themselves if the wait was worth it. One thing is certain: It's been a passion project for a small team that's been given the rare gift of time.

» **Jeff Cork**





New Pokémon Snap

Back behind the lens

Following a long absence, the Pokémon Snap franchise is finally back with New Pokémon Snap. This follow-up to the Nintendo 64 favorite once again sets you out on an adventure to photograph wild Pokémon, but much has changed in the 22 years since Nintendo released the original.

In New Pokémon Snap, you travel to a lush set of islands in the Lental region to learn more about a new phenomenon known as Illumina. Working alongside Professor Mirror, you must observe and photograph Pokémon in their natural habitats to discover why certain creatures and vegetation

possess a special glow.

As you take pictures of the more-than 200 Pokémon in the game, you fill up your Photodex. As your adventure continues, you travel to different biomes like beaches, jungles, and deserts to find new Pokémon to photograph.

New Pokémon Snap uses similar mechanics as the original game; you hop into your NEO-ONE pod, which floats along the path, allowing you to see the myriad Pokémon species living in the habitat you're in. As you spot them, you can toss fruit their way to lure them to better spots for your shots, or to encourage them to interact with one another. After each expedition,

Professor Mirror grades your shots based on pose, size, direction, placement, background, and if other Pokémon are in the frame. From there, you can build your very own album with your favorite photos.

Whether you're trying to get the perfect pose for Pikachu or a special shot of Scorbunny, you can expect creatures that span the generational spectrum in New Pokémon Snap. While we haven't had a chance to see or play the game ourselves as of this writing, there's plenty of reason to be excited for another adventure, where capturing Pokémon takes on a different meaning.

» **Brian Shea**

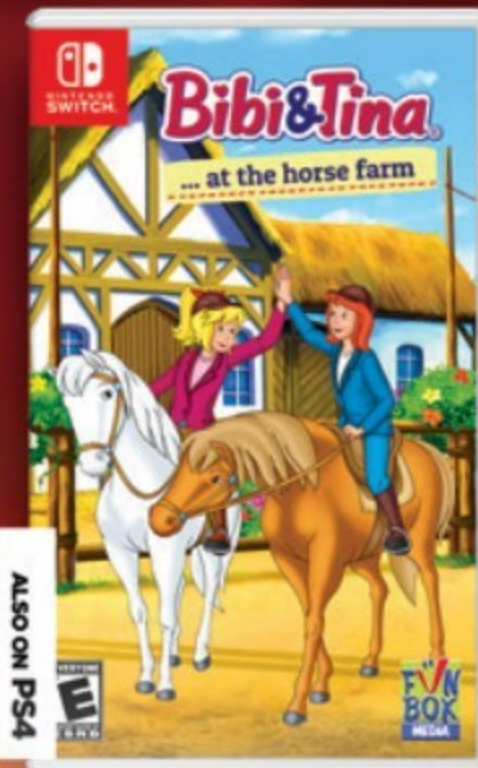
» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Simulation

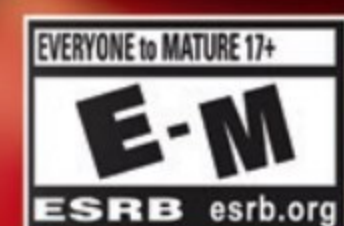
» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Bandai Namco Studios

» **Release**
April 30



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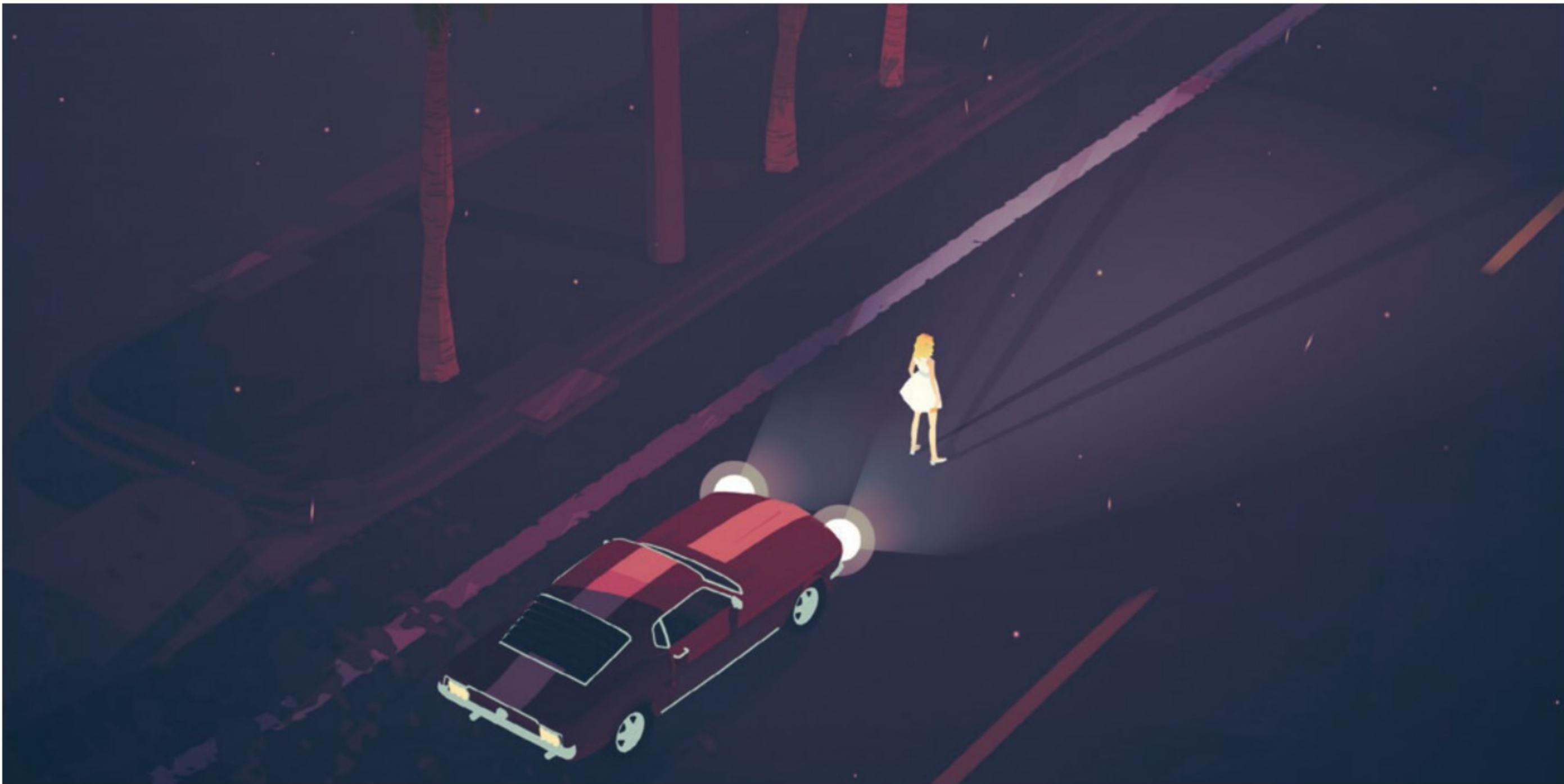


Stray

Stray has been in development for the last six years, and we're finally inching closer to getting our hands on it. Inspired by the now-demolished Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong, a densely packed, ungoverned enclave where the sun rarely made it to street level, Stray puts you in the shoes (or paws) of a cat as it explores a similarly dense city, but with a futuristic twist. Developer BlueTwelveStudio has been mum on story details, but still, we can't wait to explore this unique setting when the game is released later this year.

League Of Legends: Wild Rift

Android and iOS will play host to Riot's big push into the mobile space. Wild Rift isn't a direct port, but rather aims to reapproach the competition and challenge of the original 12-year-old League of Legends game and transform it into a modern mobile experience, complete with dramatically reimagined controls. More than 70 champions arrive at launch in March, but more playable options will join the party every few weeks.



Dead Static Drive

Described by creator Mike Blackney as "Grand Theft Cthulhu," Dead Static Drive is a top-down survival game with a heavy focus on Lovecraftian horror. In development since 2014, the game tells the story of an unnamed character on a road trip to see family, when inconveniently the apocalypse happens. Inspired by games like Grand Theft Auto and movies like *The Evil Dead* and *Akira*, Dead Static Drive doesn't have a release date yet, but is expected to be released on Xbox One via Game Pass and PC.



Little Devil Inside

Little Devil Inside has been quietly coming together since it was Kickstarted in 2015, and it's been an agonizing wait given how promising it looks. The game stars an explorer of sorts and his elderly butler as they tackle a strange world filled with fantastical beasts. Not much is known about gameplay other than it's an action/RPG with survival elements and features a semi-open world. What we can say with certainty is that the whimsical art direction looks fantastic. Little Devil Inside will be released in July for PlayStation 5 and PlayStation 4 (as a timed console exclusive) as well as PC. It'll be coming to Xbox One and Switch at a later date.

Crash Bandicoot: On The Run!

King is digging back through the many villains and locations from nearly 25 years of Crash Bandicoot games to develop this new mobile runner. Crash and younger sister Coco are both playable characters who leap and zip back and forth through the 3D branching levels, as well as survival, time trial, and challenge runs. A buildable base offers upgrades and customizations, including hundreds of skins. Watch for release on iOS and Android this spring.

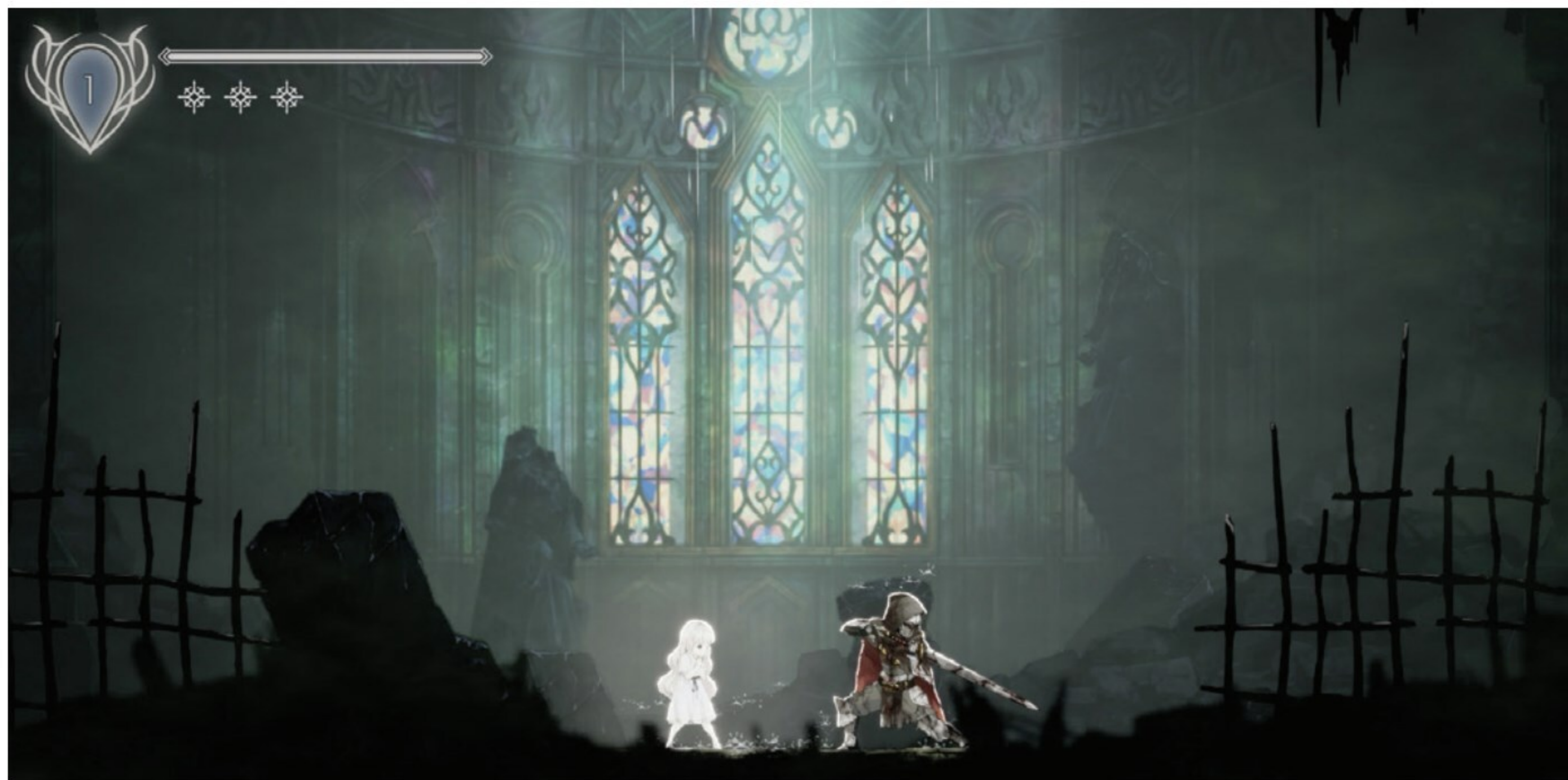


Everspace 2

If you enjoy blasting lasers, collecting tons of loot, customizing your ship, and exploring the vast reaches of space, Rockfish Games' Everspace 2 may be just the game you're looking for. Available now in early access on PC, Everspace 2 has a lot more to add over the coming months, but there's a perfectly enjoyable taste of galaxy living already on deck. Single-player, open-world space odysseys are a genre we don't see too many titles in, so we're looking forward to Everspace 2's eventual polished release.

Ender Lilies: Quietus Of The Knights

If you're a fan of Souls-likes or Metroidvanias, Ender Lilies is a game to watch. With a healthy amount of Hollow Knight inspiration, you explore various biomes, take on huge bosses, and gain new powers to unlock new areas. Featuring stylized artwork and a beautiful soundtrack by Mili, the world distinguishes itself well. While the early access release only has a few zones and bosses to take on, it's given us every reason to be excited for launch.



Story Of Seasons: Pioneers Of Olive Town

These days, farming is in style and there's no shortage of ways to cultivate a new livelihood, but that doesn't make it any less appealing. The Story of Seasons series is back, making its Nintendo Switch debut on March 23. Create the farm of your dreams with more customization options, tame the wilderness, and discover everything from islands in the sky to the inside of a volcano. Of course, the standbys remain in over 200 unique events, such as finding the perfect marriage candidate, meeting eccentric townspeople, and participating in festivals.



Tchia

Inspired by the Pacific isle of New Caledonia, Tchia is a lovely open-world game by developer Awaceb. Players control the titular Tchia, who has the ability to inhabit and control animals and objects. When you're not romping around as a bird or a coconut, you're sailing to islands à la The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker, exploring underwater, gliding across the terrain, or scaling steep cliff sides. Tchia looks like it'll pack tons of fun with just as much heart, so we hope it arrives sooner than later.

MLB The Show 21

Since its inception in 1997, Sony's MLB series has been exclusive to PlayStation, while owners of other consoles have been stuck on the bleachers. That changes this year, as MLB The Show 21 is coming to Xbox for the first time. While not much is known about this initial multi-platform release, we know it offers cross-platform play and the awesome storyline-driven March to October mode, and we expect the career-focused Road to the Show to return. Fans can take the field on PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, and Xbox One on April 20.



Evil Genius 2: World Domination

Building empires is a common feature of PC strategy games, but Evil Genius 2 puts a sinister spin on the formula by casting you as a nefarious supervillain bent on world domination. Developer Rebellion is taking control for this sequel to the 2004 original, but after playing through the tutorial, we can say that it seems to hit the same gleefully wicked notes. You build a sprawling base, command minions, set traps, and participate in global espionage – but the tone doesn't get dark thanks to the tongue-in-cheek humor and cool, retro-futuristic vibe.



Puzzle Quest 3

The influential puzzle/RPG series is coming back in 2021. Publisher 505 Games isn't sharing much at this point, but the company did say that players can expect the familiar gem-matching battles, character progression, and head-to-head fights. It's been more than a decade since the last mainline entry in the series, so we're excited to see what new features the team at Infinity Plus Two has been cooking up. The free-to-play game is in development for multiple platforms, including mobile and PC.



EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 334

75 Little Nightmares II

Tarsier Studios is back with another dark chapter in its Little Nightmares series. Little Nightmares II may put a new kid in the spotlight, but the gameplay is instantly familiar – and as creepy as ever. If you enjoyed the original game's twisted enemy designs and clever puzzle-platforming, this is an essential experience. You may want to keep the lights on, however, just in case.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	The fate of Anthem 2.0.

Little Nightmares II

A horrifying city for lost children

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Developer** Tarsier Studios **Release** February 11 **Rating** T

9.25

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • Stadia • PC

» Concept

Continue to flesh out the series' expanding lore, introducing a new child who guides Six through a horrifying city

» Graphics

Brace yourself for some truly terrible sights, amplified by eerie lighting and depth-of-focus effects

» Sound

The soundscape is sparse, but effective. Bare feet slapping on concrete and ambient hums are the primary sounds for long stretches

» Playability

Quality-of-life upgrades make essential actions like carrying keys and scrambling along narrow walkways much easier than they were in the original

» Entertainment

This impressive follow-up builds on its predecessor with emotional gut punches and unnerving visuals that stick with you

» Replay Value

Moderately low



A young boy awakens in a clearing, a disproportionally large television bathing the area an eerie cathode-ray-tube blue. This boy, Mono, will meet Six, the hero from the first Little Nightmares – and also get an introduction to what he's truly up against. In this world, you're constantly underpowered and pursued by towering creatures who see you, at best, as vermin to be eradicated. It's a masterfully executed sequel that shows that the first game wasn't just a fluke.

I love Little Nightmares II's structure, despite its awful inhabitants. It's broken into several extended vignettes in which Mono and Six contend with an oversized monstrosity while trying to escape to the next area by solving puzzles and staying out of sight. The first game had memorable encounters such as with the janitor, who blindly groped around for Six with his horrifically elongated arms. I wasn't certain if the follow-up would be able to capture those amazing designs or the dread they created. Those fears were misplaced.

Little Nightmares II has even more ghoulish adversaries, including a teacher who made me give an audible "Nope!" as soon as I understood what she was truly capable of. Part of the fun, if you'd call it that, is watching these oddly animated humanoids lurch around their environments, performing their work while you stay low and search for an escape. You have to be

patient, choosing the right moment to scurry past or risk getting caught. That means waiting for the teacher to turn her back and scrawl nonsense on the blackboard or, later, for her to cram suspiciously squishy organs into the empty spots on an anatomical model – a model that's partially dressed in a school uniform.

There's an abundance of horrific imagery and dread-inducing atmosphere, but you don't need to face it all alone. Puzzles are creative and rely on the team dynamic between you and the A.I.-controlled Six. She's a helpful companion, whether by giving you a boost or pointing out next steps in a tricky sequence. You routinely split up, too, so her presence doesn't drain the tension out of scenarios. While you still turn your share of cranks and push boxes around to reach high places, new abilities and systems keep things fresh and surprising even in the late game.

Little Nightmares II extends the series' lore in significant ways; you could probably jump right into it, but I'd strongly recommend playing the original and its DLC first. The story won't be nearly as satisfying without having that background. The second game is an enhanced version of what came before, retaining what makes the formula excellent while buffing out some of its more frustrating elements. For instance, Mono automatically sticks to narrow walkways, which is a godsend

considering the camera's dynamic positioning. Some of the jumps are still a little sloppy, but at least you don't need to tediously edge along pipes or planks one step at a time or risk plummeting to your doom.

The sensation of being small and powerless in a dangerous world remains at the core of Little Nightmares II. Though Mono does have the ability to defend himself, that combat is where the game is at its weakest. Mono isn't a melee powerhouse; when he grabs pipes or axes, he's barely able to drag them behind his diminutive frame. As such, winding up for an attack takes time as he coaxes up the necessary strength. And you're not fighting the bigger showcase enemies, but smaller, quicker creeps. You can probably see the problem here: If you whiff it, you're basically dead. Nicely spaced-out checkpoints minimize the frustration of failure, but fighting back rarely feels empowering.

One of my favorite things about the first game was being introduced to a bizarre world and trying to determine Six's place in it. It's ambiguous enough to allow for multiple interpretations, and Little Nightmares II continues to invite speculation. There are new elements to consider, but I was still left with an abundance of questions after its shocking ending. Fans of macabre and sinister environmental storytelling, consider this your first essential title of 2021. » **Jeff Cork**



Bravely Default II

Switching up the grind

8

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Nintendo Developer Claytechworks Release February 26 Rating T

Switch

» Concept

Turn-based battle your way through a world in peril with a highly customizable crew of adventurers

» Graphics

While some of the dungeon environments are quite beautiful, many areas are nondescript. Plus, the chibi characters sometimes look strange situated against other backdrops

» Sound

The soundtrack is solid and will have you humming along in dungeons

» Playability

A casual difficulty mode is offered for players who don't want to struggle with too much of a grind, but be aware some job combos must be experimented with even on the easier setting

» Entertainment

If you enjoy the RPGs of eras long past, Bravely Default II captures some satisfying whimsy and nostalgia, but its formulaic structure can feel tedious

» Replay Value

Low

Bravely Default II harks back to another age of fantasy role-playing games, where players would find tiles to pace back and forth upon, taking on random encounters to gain experience and resources before proceeding to the dungeon boss. Managing a team of four, players change jobs to access a wide variety of skills and abilities, combine them with gear choices, and craft their own satisfying builds to take on encounters. The overall experience is a nice trip for those looking to immerse themselves in job experiments, exploration, and monster-slaying, but the ride is firmly rooted in a formula that can drift toward dull at times.

Environments are all over the place in terms of quality as you tackle myriad dungeons. A few are picturesque and memorable with visual trappings like flying bats or scrying clouds, but the majority are drab caves, earthy sprawls, and undercityscapes. Neat lighting effects accompany some of the surroundings, but outside of a few exceptions, the world is a forgettable backdrop for monsters to crawl around in.

Epic signature fights at the end of each dungeon are often multi-phase affairs that can force you to craft a team designed to capitalize on its strengths and weaknesses, which may mean you're going back to the grind. It feels good to "solve" a boss puzzle, but it also means you can't rely on a single team with stacked abilities to get you through each encounter, as using the wrong sets of skills for a particular battle can leave you annihilated in moments. The experience of crushing through a dungeon,

collecting all the loot, and then getting the entire team slaughtered in a single attack by the area boss can be humbling (and definitely frustrating), but working out how to combine and craft a team to handle various challenges is satisfying as well.

Grinding is a big part of the game, so if you don't enjoy doing it, this one probably isn't for you. Luckily, Bravely Default II is cognizant of its own nature and provides players the tools to fly through skirmishes once your setups get going. By taking advantage of ultra-fast combat speed and monster treats that allow you to stack up a bunch of battles into one for additional rewards, you can take the sting out of hours of grinding and turn it into a much more palatable pastime.

While grinding, you need to think about job abilities in interesting and fun ways to forge lawnmower compositions that gobble up experience and loot in ridiculous quantities. For instance, I loved making my basic attacks hit all enemies with additional basic attack chances on top of stealing effects, allowing my crew to hit every target on screen with each attack and rob them at the same time. By combining skills and abilities, there's no problem getting the job experience and gear needed to overcome the toughest fights.

The "dungeon, savepoint, boss" template is slightly broken up by refreshing side quests and world exploration activities that include massively overpowered rare monsters that can be found in out-of-the-way areas on the world map. There's even an entertaining Triple-Triad-style card game that you can dig into

to break the standard routine. Still, killing reams of opponents loses its luster and feels monotonous from time to time, even with the alternative activities. On one occasion when I unloaded in town, I had approximately 80 of one axe drop to sell – a testament to just how many challengers I'd downed on that farm session.

While these side activities are welcome, you still have to be comfortable with hours of monster mashing. As I harbor a good deal of nostalgia for old-school RPGs, this wasn't a problem for me, but if you're expecting a captivating story, interesting dialogue, or villains that don't produce massive eyerolls, you won't find those things here. The baddies have some of the hammiest quips I've ever heard, combined with lame responses from our heroic cast.

Fans of previous games may notice that the ability to turn off enemy encounters has been removed in this outing of Bravely, but don't worry about it too much. Enemies that are weaker than the party will quickly run away, meaning they only need to be battled if you opt in to that fight. This allows you to turn your monster treats on for farming, and move through areas without a single battle when focused on progression.

Bravely Default II succeeds at delivering what it's best at: offering a taste of the past with the emphasis on creative class combinations, hordes of foes, and big boss battles. Bravely Default II deftly harnesses some of the ancient enchantment of classic grind-and-go console RPGs – but don't expect anything beyond that.

» Daniel Tack

Persona 5 Strikers

A powerful other self

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Atlus **Developer** Atlus, Omega Force **Release** February 23 **Rating** M

8.5

PS4 • Switch • PC

At the end of Persona 5, we parted ways with a terrific cast of characters we grew to love over the course of a 100-hour story. Last year's Persona 5 Royal gave us an excuse to revisit that same adventure with additional content, but fans yearned for an all-new journey. Persona 5 Strikers reunites the cast from the original game six months later for an all-new trip across Japan. Even though it drastically changes a few key elements of the experience, it still feels like a true, compelling continuation of the game that stole RPG fans' hearts nearly four years ago.

Many parts of the Persona 5 experience carry into Strikers; after hearing rumors of people abusing their power, you control the Phantom Thieves as you investigate the allegations before jumping to the cognitive world of the Metaverse to infiltrate their dungeon (which are called "jails" this time around) and change their hearts. Along the way, you fight through tons of Shadows as you progress toward the leader of the dungeon for a climactic showdown. While knowing the original game's story enhances the experience, it's not a requirement to enjoy Strikers. The familiarity of this formula is like a warm homecoming for those that did play Persona 5, but once you start beating up enemies, it's evident this is a different beast from the traditionally turn-based RPG series.

When it's time to battle, Persona 5 Strikers changes from a methodical dungeon-crawler to an all-out action game. The hack-and-slash style of combat from Musou games like Dynasty Warriors is implemented in small-scale encounters; each Phantom Thief has light and heavy attacks you use in different combinations to perform special attacks with status effects. I loved the frenetic and intuitive action that comes from slashing through hordes of enemies and watching them fly off the edge of Joker's knife or Panther's whip, but the combat adds extra depth using the characters' Personas.

At any point in a battle, you can summon a character's Persona; the action pauses as you choose a spell to cast and the area it will affect. If you hit an enemy's weakness, you open them up for a follow-up attack. If you hit them hard enough, you initiate a powerful All-Out Attack, where the whole team pounces on the enemies at once. The

summoning system, when combined with the fast-paced combat and different environmental interactions, delivers a smooth experience that empowers you to take down enemies in stylish and efficient fashion. My favorite battles had me swapping between characters, rattling off different combos, exploiting weaknesses with their Personas, detonating explosive devices, dropping chandeliers, and delivering devastating final blows to close out the show. A constant stream of this action would be exhausting, but Persona 5 Strikers does a good job of pacing the encounters out within the jails.

Jails share many attributes with the palaces of Persona 5. They both exist in the Metaverse, have a ruler you're trying to defeat to change their behavior in the real world, and are full of Shadows to take down. However, jails don't deliver the creativity of the palace design. I appreciated the waypoint always telling me where to go, but when nearly every jail is a point-A-to-point-B venture, I eventually felt like I was simply going through the motions to reach my destination. One jail attempts to mix up the formula with a short stealth section and paths with portals that dump you in other areas, but these changes come across more as half-hearted gimmicks that I was glad to see abandoned after one appearance.

Each jail is ruled by a monarch, a powerful individual in the real-world who has found a way to steal the desires of everyday people to essentially enslave them. Instead of giving in

to one of the seven deadly sins, monarchs have had their hearts corrupted by some form of personal trauma. I sometimes struggled to sympathize with the characters when the time came for their change of heart, but when this narrative thread works, the story of Persona 5 Strikers delivers some truly touching sequences about how trauma can change a person. These moments are enhanced by how many of them draw parallels to what a member of your team went through in the first game.

Catching up with various members of the Phantom Thieves was the element I was most excited for in Persona 5 Strikers, and it delivers for the most part. I loved learning what they've been up to since the first game and watching them grow even more through this adventure. However, I was disappointed to have limited social-simulation opportunities. The social-link mechanics are nowhere to be found in Strikers. Instead, you have a bond system that lets you upgrade the party. You can talk to the characters around the city and invite a companion of your choosing to do certain activities during the story, but the conversations are typically inconsequential and underwhelming.

While not every disparate element comes together as well as it did in Persona 5, I was more than happy to go on another adventure with the characters I developed such bonds with back in 2017. The action may play out completely differently, but the heart of the series remains intact. » **Brian Shea**

» Concept

Embark on another adventure with the Phantom Thieves set six months after the conclusion of Persona 5. Hang out, solve mysteries, and explore dungeons along the way

» Graphics

The impressive visuals are overflowing with style and flash during the action-driven battles

» Sound

Strikers adds all-new tracks to Persona 5's already-excellent soundtrack, alongside remixes of old favorites. I loved hearing the original cast reunite to voice their characters once again

» Playability

Exploring Metaverse dungeons feels similar to the palaces you remember, but now the turn-based battles are replaced with frantic hack-and-slash fare that is a surprisingly natural fit for the series

» Entertainment

While Persona 5 Strikers disappointingly removes the mainline series' social links, it carries over enough familiar elements to feel like a true successor

» Replay Value

Moderate





Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury

The cat's pajamas

9.25

Style 1 to 4-Player Platforming (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **Release** February 12 **Rating** E

Switch

» Concept

Relive one of Mario's greatest 3D adventures with an additional campaign that uses the same gameplay within a distinct structure

» Graphics

The colorful charm of Nintendo's flagship franchise is in full effect, and Fury Bowser is a sight to behold

» Sound

Terrific music and cute cat sounds accompany your adventures to take down Bowser

» Playability

Whether you're reliving past glories with Super Mario 3D World or taking on new challenges in Bowser's Fury, Mario's movement is precise and responsive. The power-ups are among the best in the series

» Entertainment

This package combines tried-and-true gameplay and level design with unique concepts (plus an all-new game) to earn its place among the elite games in the franchise

» Replay Value

Moderately high

When Super Mario 3D World was released in 2013, the adventure was widely praised for its outstanding level design, precise gameplay, and chaotic co-op. However, since it debuted on the poor-selling Wii U, it is often overlooked in discussions about the best games in the Mario franchise. Now, Nintendo is giving a wider audience a chance to play the superb 3D adventure (this time with online co-op) while also adding an all-new experience in a fun side game called Bowser's Fury.

The meat of this package is the port of Super Mario 3D World. Nearly 100 linear, fixed-camera stages wait for you to run, jump, and explore by yourself or with up to three friends. Each one presents clever gimmicks; my favorites include levels based on timing your jumps with the music across disappearing platforms, using ever-increasing clones to open new areas, or playing through sections of a stage with only the shadows cast on the walls.

Every level contains secrets galore, including collectible stamps and green stars, but the power-ups offer the greatest rewards. The Super Bell, which turns Mario and company into cats, adds useful melee and climbing abilities. Old favorites like the Super Leaf, Boomerang Flower, and Fire Flower give players diverse ways to take on platforming challenges and enemy encounters.

Super Mario 3D World is a blast by yourself or with others, especially now that online play is an option. Cooperative gameplay in platforming titles is often fun, but usually hinders your progression due to the sheer chaos of having multiple players trying to reach the same areas. In Super Mario 3D World, those moments still occur – I accidentally picked up my co-op partners on more than a few occasions – but your road to the final

showdown with Bowser might be easier with friends this time. That's all thanks to levels that reward taking chances, rules that allow you to treat your co-op partners like a safety net, and areas that give you enough space for four characters.

The tweaks to Super Mario 3D World are minimal, so if you're looking for something new, this package also includes a second game called Bowser's Fury. This additional adventure, which lasts a few hours, takes the gameplay and power-ups of Super Mario 3D World, but swings the camera behind Mario, removes the linear individual stages, and adds the looming threat of a monstrous form known as Fury Bowser. This massive, corrupted beast hibernates in the middle of the feline-themed Lake Lapcat as you run around a large open area, completing objectives.

Rather than dumping you into a hub world and letting you select the stage you want to play like in 3D World, Bowser's Fury takes place in an open map with distinct islands for you to explore. These areas feature some of the most enjoyable playgrounds Mario has ever encountered. The most memorable sequences include a labyrinth of pipes, a lengthy ascent on invisible platforms, and a downhill course full of ramps and obstacles where you ride an ice skate and nab collectibles. You can also use Bowser Jr., who is your ally in this game, to attack enemies and uncover secrets.

The objective structure takes a page from games like Mario 64 and Odyssey, where you are given a mission name and environmental clues to try and earn a Cat Shine, the main collectible in Bowser's Fury. I loved jumping across moving platforms en route to a boss battle or riding on the aquatic dino Plessie to complete various swimming challenges. These missions are exciting

on their own, but the intensity ratchets up when Fury Bowser awakens.

Every so often, it starts raining; that's your first sign. Soon, Fury Bowser awakens to harass you for the next couple of minutes. Once the beast emerges, all bets are off as the pleasant Mario music gives way to a roaring guitar riff and storm clouds block out the sun. Fury Bowser drops down spikes and fireballs and stalks you with his fiery breath. While this certainly provides a thrilling experience, if it happens at the wrong time, it also ups the frustration; on one occasion, I finally made it past a tricky part of a rotating obstacle course, only to have Fury Bowser wake up and cause me to fall all the way back to the bottom. Occurrences like those are rare, but that didn't stop me from cursing his name.

Fury Bowser's arrival isn't all bad, as you can use his attacks to open areas containing additional Cat Shines. Also, if you have enough Cat Shines when he appears, you enter a boss battle against the behemoth. In these face-offs, Mario grows to match his longtime adversary as Giga Cat Mario. These battles require you to dodge the all-out offensive brought by Fury Bowser and pounce on any chance to hit his weakness, whether that's waiting for him to expose his underbelly or by returning projectiles to knock him over. These battles can get repetitive, and Bowser sometimes gets caught on the environment, but they offer a white-knuckled thrill unlike most other battles in this two-game package.

Having another chance to revisit Super Mario 3D World (or experience it for the first time) is reason enough to be excited. However, with an excellent, all-new game joining the Wii U port, Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury is a compelling option for anyone who wants more Mario in their life.

» **Brian Shea**

Ghosts 'N Goblins Resurrection

The beauty of nostalgia

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** February 25 **Rating** E10+

9

Switch

» Concept

A long-overdue sequel to the Super Nintendo game, *Ghouls 'n Ghosts*, that is wonderfully nostalgic and fantastically modern in its brutal action

» Graphics

Basic enemy designs and backdrops are given flair with storybook-like details. Some of the animations almost look like they are made using stop-motion. It all adds up to a beautiful picture

» Sound

Iconic retro melodies flow through the entire adventure

» Playability

The simple acts of jumping and shooting are heightened by excellent scenario design and do-or-die moments

» Entertainment

An incredible continuation that is a showcase of clever stages and pitch-perfect twitch reflexes

» Replay Value

High



Ghost 'n Goblins: Resurrection is a game that time forgot, designed to transport players to the heyday of the Super Nintendo where visual beauty meets gameplay brutality, dazzling and pummeling in equal parts. The stack of corpses Resurrection piled up during my playthrough made me swear like a sailor, and yet I walked away singing its praises as one of the best throwbacks I've ever played.

Legendary hero Arthur and his more famous pair of boxer shorts return to be lit on fire, knocked into pits, and munched by a cave made of teeth, much to the chagrin of the player and delight of Capcom's designers (which is spearheaded by Tokuro Fujiwara, who directed the original 1985 *Ghosts 'n Goblins* game and SNES sequel). You can almost hear the latter group saying "Gotcha!" after each death that the player didn't see coming. While nostalgic in its character movement and action dynamics, the level designs are wickedly clever and always changing, keeping you in a constant state of panic in fun and terrifying ways.

Skeletons rapidly rise from their graves as Arthur inches forward, and there's always some kind of airborne threat positioned to knock him into a pit. The action demands split-second reflexes, but even more memorization of enemy patterns and placement, which is developed by dying. An edge can be obtained through Arthur's weapon of choice, be it the quickly thrown daggers, the spreading fire of holy water, or a handful of other useful tools that can make short work of any

foe. The action is simplistic in scope; you just jump and shoot in four directions, but it feels incredibly dynamic, making everything you do feel skillful.

All levels deliver wildly different challenges that make good use of the same moveset, yet players have some agency in how they progress through it. From the outset of the adventure, a choice between two levels is given, delivering either a shorter playthrough or the option to backtrack to missed stages to take on new horrors and earn more Umbral Bees. This oddly named collectible is a form of currency used to purchase useful spells, such as being able to turn every enemy onscreen into a frog or rain down lighting on them. The wealth of skills is worth the effort, as some can be game changers in specific stages, much like getting the right weapon for a boss in *Mega Man*.

The entire game can also be played cooperatively, with the second player controlling a trio of ghosts called the Three Wise Guys, who can be swapped on the fly. Each of the guys aid Arthur in different ways, like being able to create a protective shield or lift him across a gap. It's a cool idea for co-op play that helps take some of the sting out of the game's difficulty. While the second player isn't experiencing the core gameplay, they can still have a significant role in the outcome.

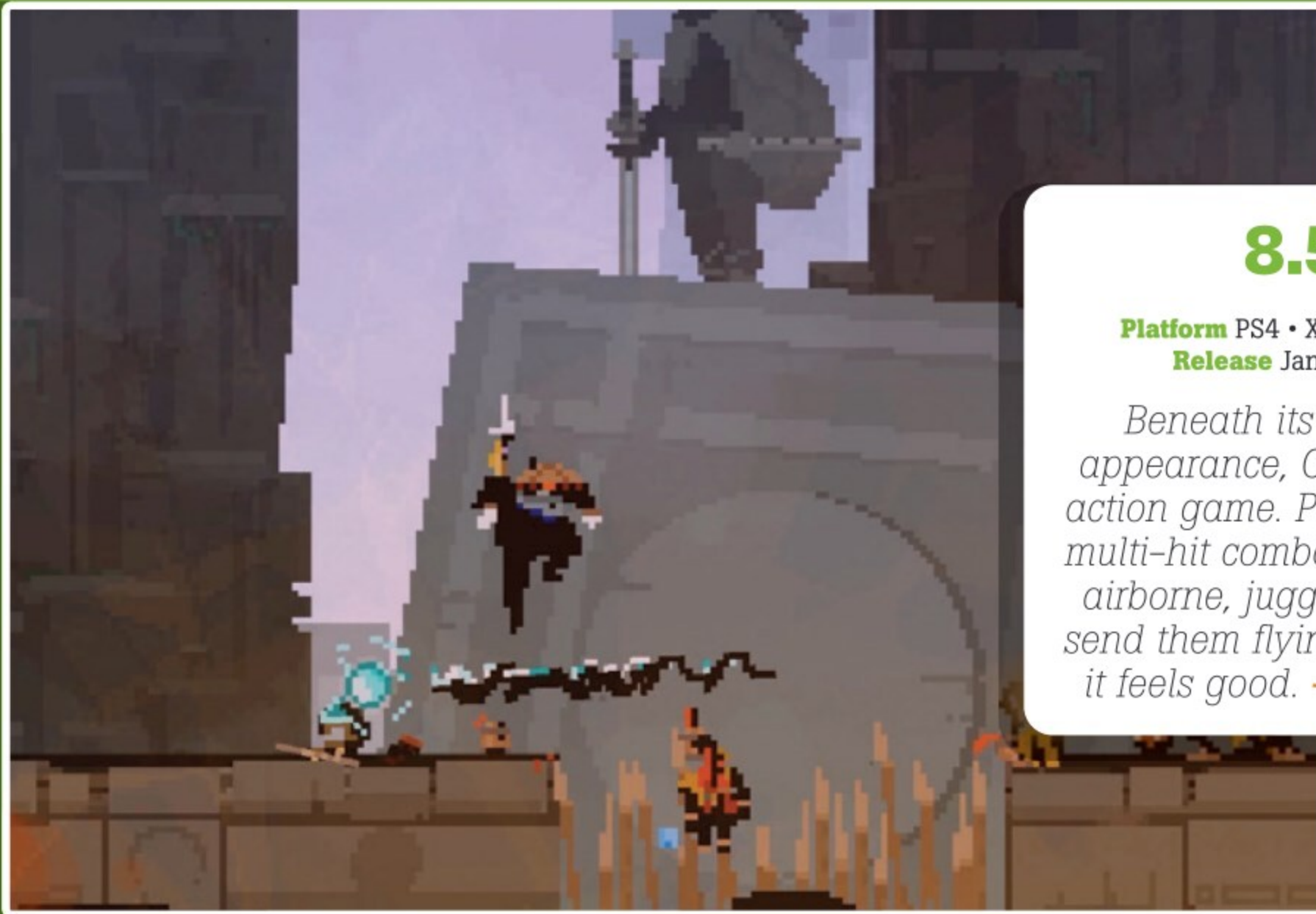
Even with the aid of a friend, the game is quick to alert you that you can lower the difficulty if situations are too challenging. If that doesn't produce results, you can activate a magic metronome to slow the game's speed to a

crawl, giving you a hell of an advantage to fill enemies full of lances, safely bound up crumbling staircases, and grab Umbral Bees that may zip past you otherwise. If you think the game is too easy, the metronome can also be used to speed it up and make it more challenging. If you just want to see the entire game without any cares in the world, the lowest difficulty setting lets you instantly respawn where you die, although some of the late-game surprises are removed when played like this.

After the final boss is slain, players can restart their adventure to experience a slightly rearranged playthrough. This again holds true to the series' roots, with transformed stages and new challenges within them. This is an awesome reason to play an amazing game again, and also gives the player a chance at earning every skill.

As much fun as I had getting my butt handed to me by Resurrection, one of the best parts of it is the visual design. It looks like a storybook drawn with pencils and colored to make every moving element pop. Yes, some of the classic enemy designs are fairly uninspired, and the worlds are fairly plain in details, but together they jump off of the screen and frame the action perfectly.

Ghost 'n Goblins: Resurrection is a game of try and try again, and should you not have the chops to make it, has built in solutions to allow you to keep making progress. I didn't think I needed another *Ghost 'n Goblins* game, but Capcom proved me wrong, and now I want more. » **Andrew Reiner**



8.5 Olija

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release January 28 **Rating** T

Beneath its simple-looking appearance, Olija is a satisfying action game. Players can unleash multi-hit combos, launch enemies airborne, juggle them a bit, and send them flying into walls – and it feels good. – Marcus Stewart

8.75 The Nioh Collection

Platform PS5 **Release** February 5 **Rating** M

The Nioh Collection is a worthwhile return for seasoned pros to experience optimized visuals, DLC offerings, or different weapons and skills. For new players, this remastered collection is absolutely the best way to experience the Nioh games. – Daniel Tack

8 Destruction AllStars

Platform PS5 **Release** February 2 **Rating** T

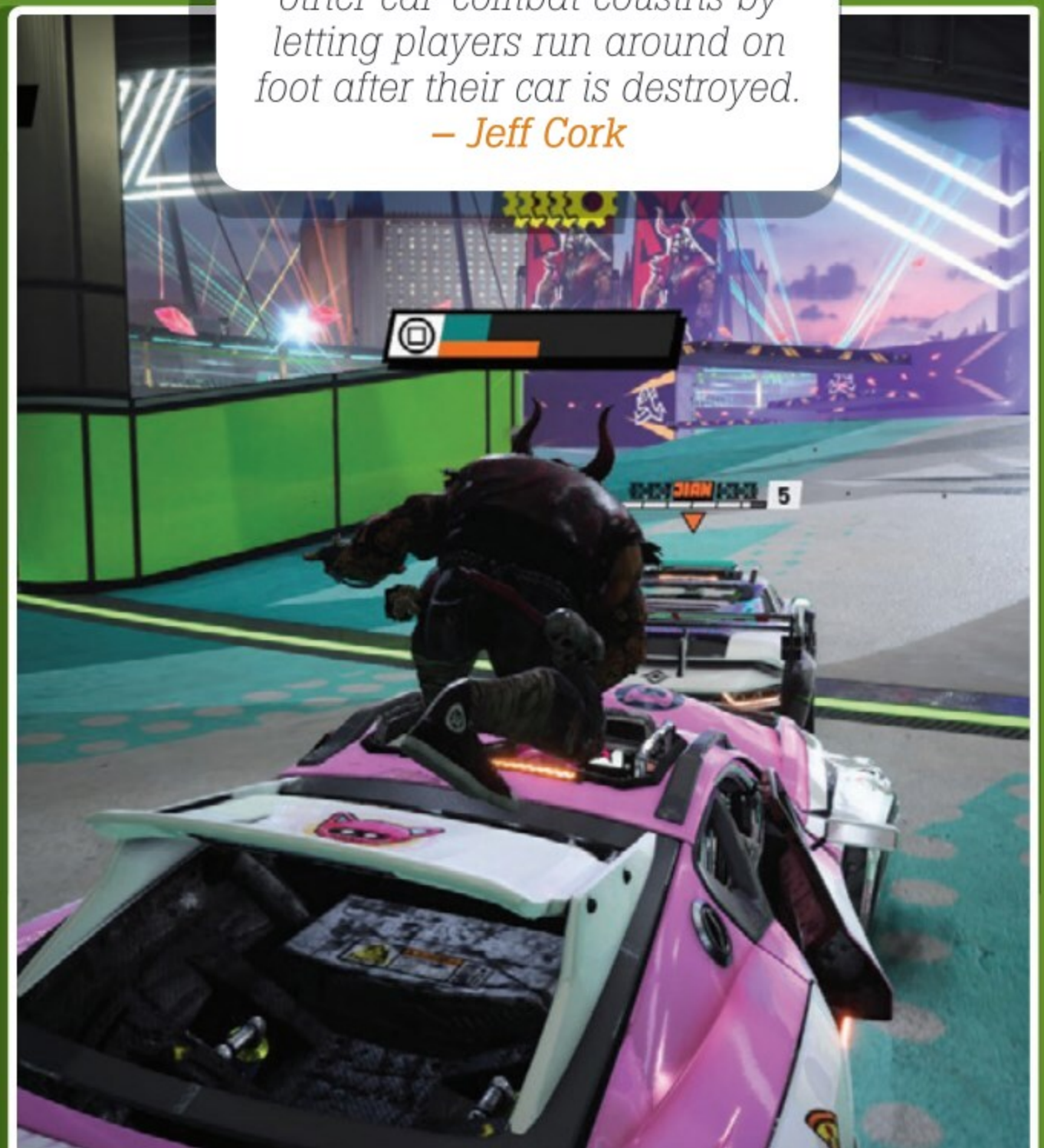
Destruction AllStars targets the dumbest part of our human brains with a simple proposition: Do you want to drive a car around and smash stuff? As a matter of fact, I do. The PlayStation 5 exclusive feels like a throwback to games like Destruction Derby, but it breaks ranks from its other car-combat cousins by letting players run around on foot after their car is destroyed. – Jeff Cork



5 Werewolf: The Apocalypse – Earthblood

Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release February 4 **Rating** M

The lycanthropic action is extremely violent, and some fun can come from tearing apart enemies like they're made of paper or tossing them at their cohorts like they are a bowling ball. This fantasy doesn't last long, and the uninteresting story and upgrade trees cannot save it in any way. – Andrew Reiner



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"DEATHLOOP"



Time Loops In Games

Thanks to our Deathloop cover story, we've been thinking a lot about time loops lately. It turns out, a lot of games have them. Below, we've collected a bunch of different games and descriptions of their time-bending mechanics. Test your knowledge and see if you can correctly match each game with its respective time loop. *by Blake Hester*

1. The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask

2. Braid

3. Minit

4. Outer Wilds

5. Shadow of Memories

6. Virtue's Last Reward

7. Escape from Monkey Island

- A. Swap brains with your future self to try and complete a cruel game.
- B. The moon is going to crash into Earth!!!!
- C. The sun is going to explode!!!!
- D. Your future self gives you a random assortment of items; avoid the gun.
- E. You only have 60 seconds to try and lift a curse before having to start again.
- F. After a long journey, walk backward and see things for how they really are.
- G. Explore four different eras in history, all in an attempt to stop your own murder outside a diner.



Answers: 1. B, 2. F, 3. E, 4. C, 5. G, 6. A, 7. D



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